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NOBBY NICK OF NEVADA; or, THE SCAMPS OF THE SIERRAS.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,

AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, "ROSEBUD ROB" NOVELS, "GILT-EDGED DICK," "BONANZA BILL," ETC., ETC.



THEY SAW A YOUNG MAN ASTRIDE A SCRAWNY DONKEY, WITH A PAIR OF COCKED SIX-SHOOTERS LEVELED STRAIGHT AT EVIL EYES.

Nobby Nick of Nevada;

OR,
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CHAPTER I.

THE OLD HUT AMONG THE CRAGS.

NIGHT has spread its wintry mantle over the Sierras. From the crest of the highest peak, to the bottom of the deepest chasm the cold gray gloom prevailed, while the bleak north wind bore on its icy breath fine flaky particles of purest white, that alighted with ease on every obstacle, covering it with a feathery coat of snow.

It was the first snow of winter, in the Sierra Nevada, and coming late in November, as it did, when all nature seemed housed and prepared for winter, it presaged the winter at hand.

In a remote part of the north range of the snow-capped hills, and far up the craggy mountain side, securely hidden in a shelving plateau dell fringed by weird, gaunt looking pines and ponderous rocks, was an old tumble-down hut, isolated from the civilized world.

It had evidently been built years ago by some venturesome miner, as decay and moss were everywhere visible about the black logs and thatched roof. It was built against the face of a huge cliff that formed one side of the plateau, and boasted of but a single slab door and a small window, up near the eaves, from which a bar of bright light streamed out upon the bleak wintry night.

Mournful melodies the north wind hummed through the gaunt pines, giving to the spot an ominous aspect.

The door was opened, and the bushy head of a man appeared; the eyes took a hasty glance around, then the head was withdrawn, and the door slammed to with a vengeance.

"Ugh! eh's a cussed tough night outside," the man said, as he strode to the fire-place, where a bright fire was burning, and around which several men were seated on camp-stools, engaged in smoking grumpy pipes. "A cussed tough night, an' I reckon the cap'n'll find it out, 'fore he rises the mountain. Et's a-snowin' and a-blowin' like thunder, outside, and ten tew one the gulch'll be full, to-morrow."

The five men on the camp-stools nodded without looking up from the cheery blaze, and went on smoking in utter disregard of what had been said.

A strange collection was the inmates of the hut, at the best. All were attired in red flannel shirts, mud-splashed pantaloons thrust in knee-boots, with slouched wool hats, and waist belts containing weapons. No masks, but immense black beards, concealed all of their faces except the tip of the nose and the eyes, their hair being dragged down over their foreheads so as to conceal even that feature.

There was another inmate to the cabin besides the bearded men, in the person of a woman, or at least some one clothed in female attire—for as she was closely masked, it was impossible to distinguish whether her face was masculine or feminine.

Nor did the Bearded Brothers know for certain, although they allowed she was a woman, judging by her voice, and she had given the name of Marie the Unknown.

She was seated at a rude table in one corner, engaged in writing, and occasionally looking over a pile of manuscript in front of her. At her right, upon the table, was a telegraph instrument, to which was connected a wire that ran through a chink between the logs of the wall, proving that these strange beings in this lone mountain retreat had electric communication with the outside world.

Another noticeable thing about the Bearded Brothers was, that each man was numbered alphabetically with a brass letter pinned upon the shirt-front. The man who had commented upon the weather, wore the letter B, and the other five respectfully C, D, E, F and G. Letter A was absent.

The drear shrieks of the wind outside caused a gloomy silence to pervade the hut, and the six men puffed away at their pipes until the whitened ceiling was lost from view in a dense cloud of smoke.

"I don't see why A does not come," Letter B growled, as he knocked the ashes from his old briarwood, preparatory to refilling. "Don't

hear ter me as of thar's enny great attraction down tew Deviltry, to-night."

"Mebbe trouble," G suggested, ominously. "Ye know H hasn't showed up fer two days. Mebbe Grim Goblin hes come down heerabouts."

As of one accord there was a general exchange of glances, and shrugging of shoulders.

The name of Grim Goblin seemed to have a startling effect upon the gang.

"No; the cussed scourge has not struck this district yet," and Letter B gave a nervous glance toward the door. "He's been workin' the mischief up around Hard Pan, and down at Blue Canyon. Any new reports, Marie?"

"None since yesterday," the Unknown replied. "There were then but four of the league left at Hard Pan, and six at Blue Canyon. All the rest have fallen prey to the vengeance of the mysterious Grim Goblin, as he styles himself."

A sullen murmur passed among the Bearded Brothers, and Letter B smote his knee heavily with his clenched fist.

"I'm cuss'd if I don't believe it's our only salvation to shut up shop and scatter. This unknown, unseen foe is a pickin' off the gang one by one, day by day, an' ye can bet yer boots we won't escape, no more'n the rest of the boys. I fer one ain't favorable ter havin' my heart cut out by this bloodthirsty avenger."

"You are cowardly, B," the Unknown said, sternly. "If the captain was to hear you say that he'd settle with you in short order."

"I didn't mean I'd a notion to desert," B growled. "I only meant we'd all better throw up ther sponge and shift, ruther'n ter git our death warrant."

"That is impossible," Marie said, stamping her foot emphatically. "Too much is at stake to entertain that idea. Our motto is 'Gain without scruple or fear.'"

"Yes; but I'll be blamed if we've seen much above our venison an whisky, awhile back, hev we, boys?"

The five men shook their heads in the negative.

"That is because business has been at a standstill. The travel has been small, and the paper has been watched narrowly. I reckon L will negotiate a fat document soon, and the result will set every man on his taps. Ah! bark!"

The Brothers sprung to their feet, and stood in an attitude of listening, with their hands upon their weapons.

Out in the night, above the howl of the wind came the muffled sound of horses' feet upon a rocky road, and a moment later the sound became lushed.

"It's A," Letter B declared, whereupon all hands dropped back upon their stools again. "He's in bad temper for he rode up the trail at a mad gallop."

A few moments later there were heavy footsteps without, and the door was flung open, admitting a tall, brawny man to the hut—another of the Brotherhood evidently, for he was bearded the same, and attired the same, with the exception of a heavy cloak worn about the shoulders.

With a keen glance about the hut, he shut the door, threw his gloves upon the floor, and striding to the fire-place warmed his hands over the dancing blaze.

"Well, what's the news at Deviltry?" Letter B inquired, drawing slowly at his pipe.

The captain granted some unintelligible sentence before replying, which might or might not have been a curse.

"No news at all," he finally said, brushing the snow from his whiskers. "Summed up, in a nutshell—snow, poker and whisky the three ruling elements."

"No news of H, I, or J, yet?"

"None. They are doubtless laying low. The town is stirred up considerable because of a check old Porcupine paid out of the Miners' Club fund. They say it's a forgery, and have withdrawn their sand from the bank."

A peculiar laugh escaped the Bearded Brotherhood, in which even the Unknown participated.

"This is the seventh thing of the kind that has happened, within two months, and the miners and citizens generally are mad as hornets. To make matters worse a miner came over from Hard Pan, to-day, with a like report. So it has become generally surmised that a gang of forgers are in the vicinity, and every one is on the alert, watching his or her neighbor, with suspicion. It would not be healthy for one of the 'shovers' to be caught just now."

And the captain laughed.

A silence of a few minutes followed, within the hut, while the wintry blasts without made weird music among the mountain crags.

Then a sudden click of the telegraph instrument, brought every man to his feet.

"Sit down!" the Unknown said, sharply, and her command was obeyed, although every man bent forward in his seat, as if over eager to grasp the every meaning of the electric clicks.

Then, turning, Marie seized a paper and pencil, and waited.

Soon there came more clicks of the instrument, now slow and measured—then a perfect tattoo of sounds.

It was all Greek to the bearded men who sat in eager waiting, but it was apparently plain enough to the Unknown, for her pencil moved upon the paper nearly as fast as came the sounds.

Finally there was a cessation of the clicks and the message lay upon the table.

"Read it!" Letter A said, huskily. "Let's know the best or worst, at once."

"The news is a mixture of good and bad," Marie said, taking up the paper. "Here it is: so judge for yourself."

"HARD PAN, November 20th: Look out for old gent coming to Deviltry—Name Gen Arlington—Lot's of money—Look out for Grim Goblin—Also for the Sharp, Nobby Nick—suspicious character—Look out for spy in employ of Government, hunting for us—Trouble brewing your way—Tap man Arlington."

Captain A uttered a fierce curse.

"We must be on our guard, now, if ever. This Nobby Nick, I have heard of before. He bears the repute of a thoroughbred, but will find that he's struck the wrong nest, in Deviltry. As for the Grim Goblin, our only salvation is to lay him out. In order to do this we must knife every suspicious new-comer. As to this man Arlington, he's our pie!"

"And good pie, too," Marie added with a light laugh.

"I chance to know this General Arlington, and his signature is as familiar to me as my own."

"It is well. We will have no difficulty then in drawing on him. And, now, since the reception of this news, I shall go back to town. B, C, D and E may follow at a latter or rather an earlier hour of the morning. While you, fair Unknown, will of course remain the guardian angel of our mountain aerie?" the captain said, gallantly raising his hat.

"Didst ever miss me from my post?" the Unknown demanded.

"Truthfully I can say no," Captain A replied, raising her gloved hand to his lips. "You came among us, unknown, as a sort of Queen, and have ruled right royally to our pecuniary interests. May you long continue in the same way. And now, my hearties, *au revoir!*" Be careful in leaving the nest that there are no observers around."

Then, taking a long pull at a brown jug which occupied a chimney corner, the leader of the Bearded Brothers wrapped his cloak well around him, and set forth into the wild November night.

Captain A was not the only storm-traveler abroad that night.

At the base of the range among whose gaunt pines was pitched the hut of the Bearded Brotherhood, ran a deep, wide gulch, between two continuous chains of mountains, whose towering peaks shut out all but a limited view of the cold, gray sky.

Snow had fallen to considerable depth, rendering everything white, and lessening the gloom of the wild, blustering night.

Plodding industriously through the snow came a horse, or rather a superannuated little donkey, bestriding which was a snow-covered figure, of stalwart proportions.

The donkey was evidently the least tired of the two, for it shied at every suspicious obstacle, while the rider dozed and nodded in his saddle, regardless of the capers of his long-eared charger.

He was finally aroused by curses fierce and loud, which came from around a bend, just ahead of him.

A sharp chirrup to the donkey caused it to canter ahead at a lively rate, soon bringing the storm-traveler to the spot whence came the curses.

And an exciting scene it was.

With his back planted firmly against a rocky cliff stood a single stalwart Indian, fighting off a half-dozen able-bodied men, with the simple aid of his clubbed rifle, while the whites in question were trying to get at him with their hunting knives.

This, however, was hard to accomplish, as was amply evidenced by a glance at three bleed-

ing figures that lay outstretched upon the white snow.

A fourth assailant received a tremendous blow beside the head, from the rifle of the Indian, just as the storm-traveler rode into view, and took a place not too gracefully beside those who had gone before him.

The man on the donkey drew rein at once, and took a glance at the situation, as if "sizing" the crowd before taking a hand.

"One Injun—five whites," he mused, drawing a pair of gleaming revolvers from his belt, and cocking them. "Good-looking Injun—whites, tough-lookin' customers. I'll drop my lines on the red spot, an' give the whites a chance to get a free passage to the next station after life."

His arrival had been unnoticed, but he sprang to the ground, and took his steed by the left ear in a patronizing manner.

"Now, see here, Doxy," he said, solemnly, "I'm goin' fer to help clean out the white gang, and I want you to take a hand also. Mind, if you earn 'em, it's a bushel of corn for you, when we strike Deviltry."

The donkey was capable of understanding, evidently, for he shot away into the midst of the fight, with a vicious squeal, and such biting and kicking as he did was a caution for the human race never to despise a donkey.

Taken utterly by surprise, the whites were thrown into a state of consternation, and what of their number did not get a dig from Doxy's heels, took leg bail for security, nearly frightened out of their wits. And of these there were but two, Doxy having made short work of the remaining three.

The storm-traveler sent a couple of random bullets after the fleeing roughs, then, with a chuckle, sauntered up to where his donkey was standing meekly before the Indian, wiggling its huge ears as if in pride over the victory of the battle.

"Well, well, Doxy, you did right well, or my handle is not Nobby Nick. A full bushel of corn shall you have the next moment after we set foot in the estimable town of Deviltry, wherever that may be. Hello, Injun! I opine they was crowdin' on you ruther close about the time I arriv', weren't they, now? Canaan and Jerusalem didn't seem more'n a mile off, eh?"

"Stern Face was not frightened," the Indian replied with stoical calmness. "Old age has frosted his hair, and caused his hand to tremble, but his arm is yet strong and heart brave."

"Good for you Injun! I like your grit. Who was them chaps who were tryin' to knife ye?"

"Wagh! bad miners. Jealous of Stern Face because he has gold. Tack him once, twice, three times. Git lick ebbery time."

"That's business! Glad my old donkey took sides with you. She's a smorter, is my Doxy, an' kin clean out any crowd she tackles. So give us yer paw, Injun, an' we'll be joggin' on toward Deviltry, wherever that may be. My name's Nobby Nick, right down from Nevada."

The old Indian put out his hand, warmly. "Pale-face good," he said. "Stern Face remember Nick. Tell Wild Flower about him. Good-by!"

"Good-by, Injun! Hang onto yer hair," Nobby Nick replied, in his jolly way.

Then he threw himself into the saddle and Doxy cantered away down the stormy gulch.

"White pale-face—true heart," Stern Face said, watching after the eccentric couple as they died from view. "Stern Face like. Tell Wild Flower; Wild Flower like him too. Make him presents. Watch over him—ugh! Nick heap good pale-face."

And thus the man from Nevada had formed one fast friend.

CHAPTER II.

DEVILTRY—BIJE GREEN'S TAVERN.

DEVILTRY!

What a name for a place, and yet, such was the portentous appellation of the little mining town down in the heart of the Sierra Nevadas, between two ranges of snow-capped mountains.

The postal station I believe is called Surrey, but among the inhabitants, and for miles around, the town itself was called Deviltry. Why the title nobody seemed to know, unless it sprang from the fact that plenty of deviltry was always in session in the town.

In a broad deep gulch bottom nestled the scattering shanties upon a sandy and rocky surface, some two hundred all told, only about two-thirds of which were used for dwelling pur-

poses, and some of these were but mere huts and tents. Still, they answered the purpose of habitations better than none at all.

A swift running stream, some twenty yards in width, rushed through its channel in the center of the gulch, dividing the village into two parts.

On the eastern shore was the main street where the stores, saloons, and business houses were located, together with a few dwellings; across the creek were more shanties and an ore mill for refining quartz.

Of the business places, there were several stores, a half-dozen saloons, and Bijé Green's Tavern.

This large two-story log edifice was one of the landmarks of that particular region, having been built long before the discovery of gold caused a few sanguine mortals to start what was now the prosperous town of Deviltry.

Abijah Green had been the landlord from the start, and often remarked that it was his intention to continue as long as the auriferous was found within the lonesome precincts of Hard Pan Gulch.

The tavern of which Bijah was the host was a monstrous affair for the far western mining towns, having no end of rooms, and queer out-of-the-way closets, up-stairs, while the whole of the one floor below was in one great apartment, wherein was kept a bar, a post-office—which by the way was partitioned off by itself, having a wicket opening into the main apartment; a dining counter ranged along one side of the room, and the center was occupied by chairs and tables. Mr. Bijah Green was a little man of only medium stature, with remarkably thin legs and wrinkled face, and wore a perpetually hungry expression about his mouth. Moreover, the end of his nose was very red, his head was totally barren of hirsute vegetation, and he wore goggles. These facts taken together with his peculiar attire, which consisted of a long swallow-tailed coat, and a broad-brim battered plug hat so large that it rested upon his ears, gave him a most eccentric appearance.

Bijah Green generally presided at the post-office, and but little could ever be seen of him except his superannuated visage through the postal window. One reason for this lay in the fact that Bijah was a most pitiable coward, and dare not circulate about the town, for the rougher class of the residents having learned of his weakness, took every opportunity to annoy him in all sorts of ridiculous ways. Wherefore Bijah's wisdom advised him not to expose himself, unnecessarily.

Mrs. Bijah, however, was the man of the house, literally speaking, for what she didn't oversee and boss did not need bossing. Leaving Bijah to attend to the few duties devolving on a postmaster at Deviltry, she ran the rest of the establishment herself, with the assistance of a couple of Chinamen, she generally tending the bar, in person.

A big strapping woman was Mrs. Bijah Green, of some two hundred and fifty pounds' weight, with a superabundance of grit and muscle, a squarely molded red face, and red hair to match, and there were those who avowed that she could clean out any two men in the town, in a square stand-up fight. The regular habitué of the tavern never sought to provoke her into a scrimmage—that was certain.

The day following the scenes last described, was but a continuation of the wild November storm.

The wind had fallen a little at sunrise, but the snow came down ceaselessly all day, until, when darkness once more hovered over the little settlement, several feet of pure snow lay upon the surface of Mother Earth.

It was a quiet day in the place.

Placer mining was out of question, and only those who had employment in the quartz drifts made bold to crawl forth to their work. Such holidays were not every day, and the majority of the idle hands and citizens made Bijah Green's tavern their objective point, for Mrs. Bijah always kept a roaring fire in cold weather, and something else of an excellent quality behind the counter to warm the inner man. And the amount of beverage consumed on that snowy day was astonishing, yet the motley crowd kept very good-natured, although it was noticeable that they began to grow more boisterous, as the night drew on.

Mrs. Bijah looked grim, took a pair of serviceable revolvers from a drawer, and laid them upon a shelf behind the bar.

The crowd noted the movement, and the noise decreased for a time, but soon began to increase again.

It was not a particularly fascinating scene—a

host of rugged, uncouth-looking men lounging under the dull glow of early candle-light—some smoking, some drinking, others gambling.

Belted and "heeled" to a man, these citizens of Deviltry, and of a disposition to shoot at the least provocation, they were not a crowd to be regarded with any certain admiration by the peacefully-disposed mortal.

One of the leading spirits of the gang, and one upon whom the liquid spirits seemed to be having considerable effect, was a burly, broad-shouldered ruffian, who bore the title of Evil Eph—and an appropriate handle it was, for he was a swarthy, evil-looking pilgrim, with long unkempt black hair, and full beard to match, while his face was literally a mass of scars. His attire, too, was greasy and rough, and he was an unsavory appearing customer at the best.

"I tell ye, b'yees, thar's no cussed use o' bein' in a spree 'bout ye hev a spree, in dead earnest," he yelled, clambering on top of a deal table, and swinging his old hat above his head. "So fetch along some more insane as another drink, ole elerfant! It's my treat this time, or I feel's ef I could smash all creation inter pance in a red-hot seckont."

"See hyar!" Mrs. Bijah cried, in a peremptory manner. "Jest you get down off that table, or I'll cum over there an' pitch ye right pance out ov doors, Eph Saunders! Ef ye want like, what I want is to see the tin afore I lose sight of the beverage. (Whisky is whisky, nowadays!)"

"Yas, what ain't water," growled Evil Eph. "Ef it hadn't bin fer ther water ye put in yer tobick, ole woman, me an' ther boy'sd bin fastened up, redly fer Congressmen or Senators long ere this. Ef ye want money, I'm yer buckleberry! Hyar's a brick weight' twenty ounces—with three hundred an' twenty dolars ef a cent. Give ther boyes sumthin' to drink, and be sure an' give me back ther change."

And taking a gold "brick" from his inner pocket, the ruffian hurled it at Mrs. Bijah's head, regardless of what the consequences might have been, had it reached its intended mark.

But it did not, for the strong-armed proprietress caught it gracefully, and shipped it calmly as gracefully into a strong-box, before she proceeded to serve the drinks.

"I say hurra fer ther old woman, Green!" Evil Eph cried as he received his liquor. "Ef ye wasn't quite so old, an' ugly, Mrs. Bijah, cuss my boots ef I wouldn't break my neck fer what I'd kiss ye."

"Oh! ye would, would ye, you disgusting brute!" Mrs. Bijah answered, putting her arms akimbo and glaring at Saunders. "Oh! you human grizzly! Ef it wasn't fer leavin' ther bar unprotected, I'd jump right over ther mop the floor with you, so I would!"

Evil Eph well knew she never said the word she couldn't sustain, so he backed off, with a muttered curse.

Whereat a general laugh ensued which sent him to the quick.

"Hurra! Evil Eph's bluffed down," cried one. "Dursent kiss Bijé's old woman."

"Pshaw! He's no sand," another rough remarked. "I'll bet a ten-ounce brick he dursent step up an' kiss any female in town."

"You lie; I dursent," Eph roared, in a rage.

"I'll go ye another brick ye dursent," a second miner cried. "So ef you've got any sand, put up, an' we'll have some fun."

The ruffian took a glance around him, and saw that he either had to bet or flunk, in which latter case he forever forfeited the regard of his rough companions.

So, drawing a wallet from his pocket he counted out three hundred and twenty dollars in three bills, and plunked them on the table.

"Here's the worth o' two ten-ounce bricks, says I kiss the first female who axes fer mail at the post-office, ter-night!" he cried, determination in his tone. "Who holds ther stakes?"

"I will!" Mrs. Bijah cried. "It allus has bin my privilege since I run this shanty!"

"If ye please, ma'am, you failed to mention that I'm the proprietor," interposed Bijah, thrusting his head through the postal window.

"I'll show you who owns the place ef ya don't get out of sight," retorted Mrs. Bijah, seizing an empty bottle and hurling it at his head. "You kin prepare yourself for a good sound spankin', to-night, Bijah Green!"

At this the crowd cheered, and Bijah became immediately invisible.

From the earliest days of Deviltry Mrs. Bijah Green had been the "man" who held the stakes of all bets, because she was square in dealing, no matter whom she had to settle with.

The stakes were accordingly deposited in her keeping, and Evil Eph sauntered about the

room with the villainous smile of anticipation upon his face.

The crowd, too, became less noisy, and kept close watch lest they should miss the impending sport.

Very few women ever entered the tavern, and the few who did were such as had no one to end for their mail, which necessitated their coming for it in person. It was seldom, however, that they were offered insult by the rough gang who frequented the tavern, for, rough though those men were, they seemed to have some respect for unprotected femininity, when out in liquor.

To-night, however, the case was destined to be an exception.

Half an hour had not elapsed, ere the door was opened, and a young maiden, with a shawl thrown partly over her head and shoulders, entered the tavern, and made her way toward the postal window, without noticing any of the men who were loitering about, awaiting the amusement.

The young woman was somewhere about seventeen years of age. In stature she was a trifle below the medium height of women, but round and plump as a peach, yet light and graceful of movement.

In face she was remarkably bright and pretty, with a fair, health-tinted complexion, dancing blue eyes, and golden hair, which flowed in fine glossy ripples down over her shoulders.

She was clad, however, in a plain calico dress, white apron, and the shawl which covered the head and shoulders.

A murmur ran through the crowd as she passed across the floor to the postal-window, and the interpretation of that murmur was the name—

"Sandy Sue!"

All eyes were instantly turned toward Evil Eph, who was conversing with a miner.

He saw the look, and well knew what was expected of him; accordingly strode up to the postal window, where Sandy Sue was in the act of inquiring for mail matter.

"No, thar ain't nothin' fer ye, Miss Sandy Sue," the ruffian said, laying a hand familiarly upon her shoulder. "But ye sees how I've got suthin' fer ye."

"You got something for me, sir?" the girl said, turning about, and casting his hand quickly from her shoulder. "Pray how comes it that anything of mine should be in your care?"

"Waal, ye see, gal, it ain't, exactly—not yet, but it's goin' to be. Ye see as how ther boys made a bet with me about suthin'. That suthin' was to ther effect that I, Evil Eph, ther Bold Lion o' the mines, dursen't kiss ther first female woman who entered ther post-offis ter-night. I ank ther bet and put up ther three hundred dollars an' over ther I could and would do it, an' ye bein' ther first gal who's come in since ther bet, it naturally falls ter yer lot ter be kissed. So en course, you'll submit, an' not force me ter steal, when I kin git a thing in an honest sort o' way."

"Ruffian!" Sue cried, indignantly, pushing him back, "don't dare to touch me or I'll call for assistance!"

"But, that won't do no good. Ther's durned few in this town as will take yer part ag'in' Evil Eph, an' you know it. So ther purtiest thing you kin do is ter pucker up yer lips an' let me kiss 'em, an' earn my money. Then ye kin go, an' not till then. Come, now, give me the smack, little one. It'll be all over in a jiffy."

"Never! you miserable loafer—never! Stand back, and don't dare to lay a hand on me. Gentlemen! I appeal to you. Will you sit there and see this bully insult a respectable woman?"

"You bet your boots they will!" Evil Eph declared with a horrible grin. "They're all a-buffin' up ther shirt sleeves, a-thinkin' I dursen't kiss you. But they shall durned quick find out. Ef ye won't give me a kiss, my little brick-top, then by thunder I'm the lad that's going to take it, 'bout leave or license. So here goes—one, two, three, and a kiss, you see!"

And with a wild chuckle the rough leaped forward and seized her in his strong embrace, holding her arms so she could not resist.

But, for all this, the plucky girl struggled like a young tigress, and Saunders found the job of getting the kiss was not so easy as he anticipated, as it required all his efforts to keep her from breaking away.

The crowd cheered vociferously and Evil Eph swung round.

"H-help! help!" Sandy Sue shrieked.

"Curse you!" the bully gritted; "some one get her for me."

But no one seemed to prefer this assistance.

"Help! help! help!" screamed Sue, again. "Help! will no one save me?"

"No, thar won't, an' I'll cut yer cursed weaz-and, soon's I kin git hold o' my knife," the ruffian raved.

A wild shout and a clatter of hoofs was at this instant heard without the tavern, while the inmates of the bar-room sprung to their feet, with startled glances.

Then there came a tremendous crash, and a donkey and its venturesome rider came through one of the front windows and landed half-way in the middle of the bar-room.

It all occurred in an instant, as it were, and when the astonished spectators had time to collect their scattered senses, they saw a young man astride a scrawny donkey, with a pair of cocked six-shooters leveled straight upon Evil Eph.

"That's quite sufficient, my presuming friend," the new-comer spoke, in a slow but resolute tone. "I'll bother you to release that young woman, whoever she may be, and let her go her way."

"I'll be cussed ef I will," Evil Eph growled, holding his victim tightly. "I've got a wager up that I'd kiss the first gal who kum to ther post-offis to-night, an' I'm goin' ter do it."

"No, you are not. If you dare to pollute that young lady's lips against her will, I'll agree you won't be able to munch your buffalo-meat to-morrow—not if I'm any judge. Release her instantly, or, as sure as my name is Nobby Nick of Nevada, I'll let candle-light through your cowardly carcass!"

Eph looked the young stranger straight in the eye, and saw that he meant business; then he released Sue, with a baffled oath.

Glad to escape, the terrified girl turned and fled from the tavern.

After she had gone, Nobby Nick dismounted.

"And, now, by the way," he said, brushing the snow from his long wolf-skin overcoat, "if I have ruffled any one's feelings by this little proceeding, I am ready to render satisfaction by the car-load!"

CHAPTER III.

A NEVADIAN'S PROWESS.

HAD a meteor fallen down in the bar-room of Big Green's tavern, it probably would not have caused a greater state of confusion than did the arrival of Nobby Nick of Nevada.

Not but what as cool and daring men as he appeared to be had walked the planks in the floor of the old tavern—not that these rude and lawless men of devilry were inclined to be bluffed by a single man, but there was an inexplicable something in the appearance of the young stranger, added to the reports of his daring deeds, which had reached the town long before him, which caused the crowd to gaze on him in some awe.

Nobby Nick was a stalwart young fellow, of handsome limb and well-developed body, and was as lithe and agile as a panther in his movements.

In years he did not appear to be over twenty, for his face was fresh and youthful in its expression, though indicating much firmness. Eyes of midnight black, hair of the color of the raven's wing, in close-clinging curls about his head, and a smooth, handsome face, and you had the photograph of Nobby Nick, except his costume, which consisted of a pair of buckskin breeches and a fringed hunting-shirt, top boots, slouch hat pinned up on the left side, and a heavy wolf-skin overcoat, with the furry side out.

A light sporting-rifle slung at his back, and the pair of revolvers, constituted his weapons.

A murmur of astonishment escaped the crowd at the Nevadan's bold challenge, and hands were laid upon the hilts of weapons by a majority of the spectators.

"Oh! that's right," Nick said, noting the movement, "I mean business, and am glad to see that you are not inclined to be facetious. Perhaps my precipitate entrance into this Bacchanalian sanctuary has given offense to somebody, and if so, I'm ready to fight, drink or gamble with the affronted one, as to whichever direction his inclinations may lead. Fight can I from sunrise till sunset, on an empty stomach, when occasion demands; drink can I all the prime old liquid of nature you will furnish—pure and sparkling water; gamble will I with any pilgrim here, in any way, shape or manner, for any amount from a nickel to fifty or a hundred thousand dollars. And that's my layout, right fresh from old Nevada. I'm a prize package, I am, and if any one wants to in-

vest, let him amble forward at once, or forever afterward hold his peace."

And with an air of utter unconcern, the young stranger folded his arms across his breast and stood gazing around.

A hush pervaded the room; then one by one the miners dropped into chairs, or formed into little knots, and conversed in smothered tones.

Full five minutes Nobby Nick maintained his attitude; then, seeing no motion was made toward hostilities, he took off his coat and hung it up on a nail in the wall.

Acting upon this as a fact that they were to remain, the donkey betook himself to a comfortable position near the fire-place, and squatted upon his haunches dog-fashion, and closed his eyes wearily.

The move elicited a laugh from several of the bystanders, but not from Mrs. Bijah Green, who sailed out from behind her bar, in high dudgeon.

"See heer, young feller, d'ye know what I want ye ter do?" she exclaimed, striding up to Nobby Nick, and shaking her formidable fist under his nose. "D'ye know what you've got to do, or git licked like a puppy?"

"Well, no, grandmother," replied Nick, gazing at her with a smile, "I can't say as I do."

"Well, I'll inform you then!" Mrs. Bijah declared, with arms akimbo. "You kin jest fork over a fifty-dollar note for breakin' ther windy, yonder; ten dollars for cleanin' up ther muck, an' fifteen dollars for disgracin' my place by bringin' a mule into it. An' what's more, ye jest lead that animal right straight out-doors, or I'll mighty quick do it for ye."

"Pshaw! You wouldn't beso cruel as that!" Nick said, coaxingly. "Doxy he enjoys a fire jest as well as you or I."

"Can't help that. I won't have no nasty mule in my hotel—no sir-ee!"

"Oh! so this is a hotel, is it?"

"On course it is!"

"How much d'ye charge a day, then?"

"Five dollars, cash in advance, afore ye git a mouthful."

"All right! Here's ten dollars for myself an' my donkey. A loaf of bread, a pie, a few potatoes, and some cheese will answer for Doxy, while a little rare antelope steak will answer me."

"But I won't have no mule in my establishment, I say!" vociferated Mrs. Bijah.

"But, I say yes," Nick persisted. "Where I stay that donkey always stays, too, and I'm going to put up here to-night. So if you don't want Doxy to remain, you'll have to speak to him about it."

"See here, old woman, ef ye want thet mule put out, I'll do it fer ye," interposed Evil Eph, coming forward, "an' all I'll ax ye is a drink o' beenzee."

"You put the critter out, and I'll give ye the whisky," Mrs. Bijah assented.

"I'll treat the crowd if the bumper is successful," called out Nobby Nick, vaulting to a seat on one end of the bar, and lighting a cigar. "I'll allow he'll earn his bitters, for once in his life."

Evil Eph evidently did not think so.

Doxy still squatted dog-fashion, near the fire, apparently fast asleep, for his ears no longer vibrated back and forth—and a truly laughable picture he made, and one not encountered every day.

Securing a strong lariat, Evil Eph formed one end into a noose, and then, rope in hand, he crept stealthily toward the seemingly unsuspecting donkey.

He had gained a position within ten feet of the animal when, all of a sudden, Doxy sprang upon all four feet, opened his mouth wide, and gave vent to an ear-splitting scream—that startled Evil Eph, and frightened him nearly out of his wits.

The next instant Doxy made for him, with glaring eyes and distended jaws, the very picture of fury incarnate.

The spectators sprung from their seats and rushed back with cries of consternation, while, with a horrified yell, Evil Eph bounded toward the broken window.

Luckily for him, he gained the opening first and leaped out into the snowy night, a frenzied howl of terror pealing from his lips, for he expected the infuriated beast to follow him.

But in this he was agreeably mistaken. Doxy only gave chase to the broken window, evidently content with scaring the ruffian from the tavern; and giving two loud, triumphant brays through the open casement, he returned demurely to the position he had first occupied, and apparently went off into a doze again.

Nobby Nick sat upon the bar, nearly con-

vulsed with laughter, while the larger portion of the crowd seemed disposed to regard the affair good-naturedly.

"Well, granny, what d'ye think about putting the mule out?" he inquired, dryly. "Looks as ef the donk knew his biz a leetle better'n any of you, don't it?"

"Oh! you miserable blackleg—you scamp!" Mrs. Bijah cried, stamping her foot, in a rage. "I'll get even with you yet, mark my word! I'll skin you the first chance I get."

"Be mild, my dear, be mild," came the sepulchral voice of Bijah, from the postal window.

"Oh yes! I'll be mild with you when I catch you," Mrs. Bijah screeched. "Now, looker heer, young feller, my name is Abbical Green, an' I'm the proprietress and boss o' this tavern, as every one knows, an'—"

"Tain't so—I'm the proprietor," squeaked Bijah from the office.

"Will you shut up!" yelled Mrs. Bijah, hurling a poker toward the window of the U. S. department. "I'll see who's boss. As I was sayin', young fellow, either you remove that long-eared critter from my establishment, or you don't get nary a mouthful o' vittles. Now take yer choice."

"Well, as I had supper down at a miner's cabin below here, I'm not at all hungry, and so choose to let the donkey remain undisturbed," Nick answered with provoking calmness.

He then dismounted from his perch on the bar, and ensconced himself in a comfortable chair beside the donkey, and began the perusal of a newspaper which he pulled from a breast-pocket.

The crowd finding the "fun" over resumed their various games and even Mrs. Bijah seemed unwilling to disturb the peace.

And by and by the Nevadan's chin dropped forward upon his breast, and then heavy breathing pronounced him to be asleep.

Evil Eph now rejoined the crowd, but took care to keep at a safe distance from the donkey, who to all appearances, like his master, was fast asleep.

Eph and some of his boon companions cast grum glances at the sleeper as he reposed composedly in his chair.

Wearied by long and tedious rides Nobby Nick did not find it much trouble to sleep, even in so noisy a place as Bijah Green's tavern, and he was in the midst of a pleasant dream when a loud bray from the donkey brought him to his feet quick as a flash, his revolvers in his grasp.

And the cause of Doxy's signal of alarm became apparent to him at a glance.

A score or more of the most ruffianly looking inmates of the bar-room, headed by Evil Eph, were drawn up in line before him, and the man Eph was armed with a grappling hook fastened to the end of a pole, some ten feet in length.

It at once became plain to Nick, that Saunders was about attempting to hook him with the grapple when Doxy gave the alarm.

"Hal! hal! So that's your game is it," he said, leveling his revolvers. "Afraid of the lion awake you propose to take him asleep, eh? Well! that's about your style. Cowards to a man!"

"We'll cussed soon show ye, ef we be or not," Evil Eph snarled. "We've bin hev'n a confab, me an' ther boys, an' we've about cum ter ther conclusion that you're our man."

"Your man?" Nick ejaculated. "Waal, now, that depends considerably. Ef you kin walk right in an' take me, mebbe I am."

"But ye don't understand," Saunders replied, gruffly. "Ye see, some of the mining destricts hyar in ther Sierras o' late hev been hev'n' heaps o' trouble wi' a skulkin' assassin who claims to be an avenger, and calls hisself Grim Goblin. He spots out a town an' ef it suits his notion, he goes ter pickin' off ther citizens one at a time, like as ef it was no more accoutn than shutin' buzzards."

"The thing's run along more'n a year now, an' it's gittin high time suthin' was did. All sorts o' traps has been set fer him, an' yet he ain't never bin caught, till now, an' now we reckon as how we've got him."

"Fshaw, you don't mean to tell me you've really caught the wretch?"

"That's jest what we allow, pardner, an' you're the man!"

"What! I the cutthroat, Grim Goblin?"

"Perzactly. Me an' ther boys has put this an' that together, an' them's ther facts we've riv' at, you bet."

"Well, well, you've made a most positive blunder, that's certain. Why, old man, I never even heard of this Avenger, until I struck the mining camp called Hard Pan, a couple of weeks ago."

"Get out! It won't be no use fer you ter lie, fer we're convinced that you're our man, an' we're goin' ter make ye howl fer yer crimes—ain't we boys?"

"That's what we are," was the response, and the tone in which it was given bespoke the fact that these men meant business.

"But, see here! I insist that this is a mistake—a most emphatic mistake. I can, if you will give me time, prove that for the last year, until about three weeks ago, I have been in the territory of Nevada, and as your Grim Goblin's operations have been going on in these destricts for more than a year, that alone proves that I am not the man you seek."

"We ain't wantin' no better than our suspicions," Evil Eph replied, with a leer, "so ye may as well spare yer breath and surrender. You're ours, an' we're goin' ter put yer whar ye won't cut out any more white men's hearts."

"When I surrender as Grim Goblin the Avenger, which I swear I am not, it will be when my weapons have lost their powers of ready speech!" Nobby Nick retorted, in ringing tones. "So if you want me, come along, and I'll make more than one dog of you bite the dust before you get me."

Involuntarily the men fell back a pace, and exchanged glances.

"I allow we better wait till we can nab him, unawares," one of the gang suggested, "or else give up takin' him alive, an' shoot him on the spot."

"No. We want 'im alive or not at all," Saunders snorted. "We'll cut out his durned heart like he did Jim Granger's, up at Hard Pan. Ef ye're all afeared, I ain't, not by a long shot. Providin' he'll agree not to use no weapons, 'cept nateral ones, I'm the very lad as can sail right in an' capter him, an' hev him bound hand an' foot inside o' five minits."

"That hits me right away," Nobby Nick responded, with a smiling face. "Providin' it's a distinct and honorable understandin' that I use no weapons, you use no weapons, nor the crowd offer any interference, I'll give you all the chance you can get to take me a prisoner or lick me—you to take whatever knocks you get, all in good part. If you succeed in capturing me, you can take me out to the nearest tree, and string me up. If you get worsted, I'll extend a standing invitation for the rest of the crowd to step in and fill your place, one at a time. Is this a fair offer?"

"Waal, I opine it'll do—eh, boys?" Evil Eph chuckled. "Ef I can't take the cuss ther's enuff of us to tire him out. But I'm the bold bully o' the mines wot kin lay him on his back before ye kin count a hundred. So we all agree fair an' square ter yer proposition, young feller. Eh, boys—ain't it so?"

"Ay! ay!" was the response, to a man.

"You hear, Doxy," Nick said, turning to the donkey. "I'm goin' ter clean out this unhealthy crowd. So ef ye see 'em pitch onto me faster than that, or see any pilgrim draw a weapon, jest you sail in and make the fur fly. D'ye mind, now?"

The sagacious animal actually nodded his head, and gave vent to an affirmative bray, as Nick began to strip.

With a pleasant expression upon his face, and the utmost apparent unconcern, the young pilgrim from Nevada threw off his jacket and shirt, removed his boots, and stood ready for the struggle.

More than one murmur of astonishment escaped the crowd as they gazed upon his broad knotted trunk, with its deep chest, and upon his trim clean arms and their tremendous muscular development.

No man was there in the crowd who could boast of such a pair of arms.

Evil Eph did not strip, but spat upon his hands, and gave vent to a gruff laugh.

"Now, ef ye ever did see any fun, an' wantner see suthin' ter dubbel discount it, jest watch me sail in an' gobble up ther Grim Goblin. Oh! I'll show ye suthin' great!" he cried, with a ugly grin of anticipation.

Then, in a half squatting posture, he stole stealthily forward toward Nevada Nick, with a catlike tread, and a sinister glitter in his blood-shot eye which well befitted his evil name. Nearer and nearer he crept, and Nobby Nick stood with coolly folded arms, watching him sharply with his eagle eyes.

Never a move he made until Evil Eph was but little more than an arm's length away—when, with lightning quickness, he dropped on his knees, seized the ruffian by the ankles and jerked him down to the floor. As Evil Eph went down the young athlete regained his feet, still grasping his adversary's ankles, and then,

by the wonderful power of his knotted arms, he began to swing the ruffian around and around, raising him gradually, until he had him nearly above his own head.

Around and around the bully was swung by the heels, then the athlete suddenly let go his grasp, and Saunders went flying to the further end of the bar-room where he struck against the wall with crushing force.

CHAPTER IV.

GRIM GOBLIN'S NOTICE.

A WILD shout of consternation went up from the crowd, for Evil Eph rolled out upon the floor, a senseless mass of crushed and bleeding humanity.

While with folded arms, the young gladiator stood firmly erect, with his right foot apace, a faint flush upon his cheeks, a steadfast unwavering gleam in his dark eyes.

"One!" he said, calmly. "What rare old sport the ruffian made by capturing me! Is there a substitute for me to play with?"

"Hurrah!" one of the miners shouted. "Heer comes Colonel Bill Travers, the famous fightin' cockolorum of the Sierras! He'll cut yer spurs fer ye, you young bantam."

"All right; trot forward your royal rooster, and let me get a squint at him," Nick replied eagerly. "If you have some real, good, old imported stock, that's just what hits me."

The entrance of a broad-shouldered, well-proportioned six-footer had occasioned the shout of the miner, and the new-comer came quickly forward.

Rather a handsome man was the colonel, as compared with his rough comrades, for he boasted of a full round face, a clear, deadly eye, and long black hair which fell below his shoulders. His mustache, too, fairly touched his breast, and gave him a decidedly brigandish appearance.

"Well, what's the row, here?" he demanded, pausing and surveying the scene with a flashing eye. "Who's hurt?"

"Evil Eph has got the first dose," a rough by name of Alaska Joe replied. "Ye see, the chap yonder he's ready ter lick ther hull crowd ef they come fer him without weapons, one at a time. So Eph sailed in, an' yonder he lays, teetotally smashed up. The Grim Goblin jest slung him up ag'in' the wall, like as ef he wasn't nothin' more'n a muskrat, by thunder!"

"The Grim Goblin?" Col. Bill ejaculated, with a black scowl.

"Yas—that's him, yonder, w'out any shirk on. He sailed in heer ter night, a calling his jags Nobby Nick, or somethin' o' the kind, an' the boys put this an' that together, an' we made up our minds that he was ther Avenger. So we jest told him ter surrender, an' he showed fight, but sed if ary man in ther town could take him single-handed, without usin' weapons, he was willin' ter letuk."

"Oho! So this bold assassin has come down to dare us, eh?" Travers provided. "By my soul he has a hanged sight of assurance. But he must not escape, now that we have him!"

"When you get him, I wouldn't let him escape, if I were you," suggested Nick, with a sarcastic laugh. "For if you are in search of Grim Goblin, you will have to look further, as I am not your man."

"That's not for me to say," Travers replied. "The boys here have been the jury, and rendered a verdict. All being sensible fellows, I dare say it is as they have decided."

"Oh! well; have it to suit you," the man from Nevada replied. "Grim Goblin, or so Grim Goblin, if you want me, your chance is open to come and take me, and I'll venture to agree that you'll earn all of me that you can get, if you come for me fairly, one at a time."

Travers uttered an oath. "Cuss me ef you ain't got plenty of gall," he muttered. "Ef ye meant that fer a challenge, young man, I accept. Ef ye have cleaned out one o' the best fightin'-men in the town, you ain't cleaned out the best, by a long shot."

Off came the coat of the fighting man of the Sierras, and up went his sleeves, exposing a finely contoured pair of arms.

"Ready," the colonel cried, promptly, a moment later. "How'll you have it, murderer?"

"Most any way and all ways ef it suits you, you son of a coyote," the young Hercules responded, with a tormenting laugh.

"Oh! I'm easily suited when I play with bantys," Travers fired back. "I'll amuse myself first, by boxing your ears."

And stepping closer, he aimed a sudden well-directed blow at Nick's face.

But, well aimed though it was, it was as neatly parried; at the same instant the Nevadian got in a slap upon the fighting man's jaw, which made his teeth chatter, and elicited a giggle from not a few of the spectators.

"Box one!" called out Nick tauntingly. Travers uttered a smothered curse, but stood his ground, and aimed his blows thick and fast, and in a way which showed that this was not his first fight.

But it was his first attempt at boxing with such a man as this from the unclassic districts of Nevada, for, while Nobby Nick received not the first bruise, the colonel's face began to assume many of the different shades of the rainbow, and blood was visible in more than one place.

Nor was the young gladiator in the least concerned, apparently, seeming to put in his blows in a mechanical sort of way, with the utmost sang froid.

Not so with the Fighting Man of the Sierras. Infuriated over his defeat, at every move, he looked more like an enraged wild beast than a human, as he made lunge after lunge only to his further personal injury.

"Cuss ye! cuss ye!" he howled, spitting blood from between his swollen lips. "Give me a knife, somebody—a knife, I say."

"The one who draws a knife might as well go speak for his coffin," Nick said, sternly. "And as for you, my friend, a knife would not avail you."

Even as he spoke, the Nevadian leaped forward and seizing his antagonist by the throat and belt, raised him high above his head, by the nervous strength of his iron-like arms.

Then, stepping forward to the front of the building, he hurled the colonel from him, with all his strength, and he went crashing through a window, carrying sash and all out into the stormy November night.

Turning, this wondrous native of Nevada walked back to his first position, and folded his arms serenely across his breast, not betraying the least excitement or fatigue, even in his breathing.

"Next!" he called, glancing at the clock above the bar. "Don't keep the audience waiting."

But the next man did not appear.

Evident it was that courage was the thing lacking at this precise moment.

Two of the crack "knockers" of the town, were these self-same unfortunates, Evil Eph and Col. Bill, and the treatment they had received was not calculated to inspire less noted rascals to test the prodigious strength of this strange man.

"I reckon none of us want a bite, pilgrim," Alaska Joe responded, scratching his head, "bestwise them's my sentiments and I allow the rest of the crowd is about the same way o' my thinkin'. You're ther toughest meat w'ot ever struck this town, or I'm a fust-class liar."

"Well, if you are all of a disposition to mind your own business, why, all right. If, however, any of you has got an itching to sail in and wipe me out, I'm still open for business," was Nick's satisfactory assurance.

"No one anxious, eh? Well, then, if the land-lady can accommodate me with a room, I think I'll retire, as I'm most deucedly drowsy, from sitting all day in the wind. By the way, if your feelings are humane toward those fellows who attempted to play with me, to-night, I'd advise you to scrape together what's worth saving of down, and carry it to a doctor. He may be able to use it in behalf of science, if nothing more. Ha! ha! ha!"

Then, donning his apparel which he had reserved at the commencement of the struggle, he followed Mrs. Bijah Green upstairs—for the good hostess had come to the wise conclusion that the gent from Nevada was a customer who was in the habit of having his own way, and the likeliest thing she could do was humor him.

When they arrived at the head of the stairs, however, she turned, facing him, and shook a bony finger admonishingly in his face.

"See heer, young feller, et's all very plain. You're right peart, an' as good as yer ekal, any day," she said, grimly, "but you jest take the advice of an old woman who knows a few things, and keep yer watch eye open. Ef ye don't, thar's them hyar in Deviltry wh'ol make things fer you, when ye ain't on yer guard. 'Ei! mum's the word. Life's cheap, heerahouts, sometimes."

About this same hour, the weekly mail was sent to Deviltry.

Once a week was as often as the citizens of the little mining towns in the Sierras had communi-

cation with the outside, and in all probability this would not have been afforded them, had not pious Pete Travers started a pony express and mail route, charging a smart per cent, on all matter, to pay him for his trouble.

A slow, easy going mortal was Pete, who had never been known to swear, lie, drink or steal, nor to harm even a fly, and he had the entire confidence of every one, and jogged along into Deviltry every Thursday, as regular as Thursday came, and jogged out again on Friday, bringing in mail and taking out mail for ten cents apiece, each letter or package.

To-night he rode down through the snowy gulch upon his stout able-bodied horse, not in the best of spirits, despite the fact that he was considered extremely pious.

The snow had delayed him, badly, and where he should have reached Deviltry in the morning, he found himself still a round dozen miles from his destination, at eleven o'clock at night.

"Draf the snow! G'lang, Dobbin!" he growled, occasionally, casting an eye at his surroundings, suspiciously. "Et's high time we was ter town, for these mountings have a pesky bad reputation, they say. More'n one man's bin robbed heer. Goodness knows how many robbers may be laying fer me, anywhere's along heer."

The thought seemed to make him nervous, for he urged his steed into a gallop, something, by the way, quite unusual with him.

"S'posin' some of the pesky rascals should git it into their heads that I've got money aboard, to-night?" was his next thought. "I s'pose I'd be killed and scalped, right here."

The words in thought had scarcely occurred to him, when he dashed into a dark shadow cast by overhanging rocks, and the next instant his horse was hurled back upon his haunches so suddenly that Pious Peter found himself keeling backward into the snow.

Frightened nearly out of his wits, he made no attempt to arise, but lay upon his back in the snow and yelled at the top of his lungs for assistance, until—

Until he felt something of icy coldness touch his cheek, and opened his eyes to behold a tall form standing beside him, entirely wrapped in a black gown, which covered the face and head as well as the body, with the exception of a slit to breathe through, and a pair of eye holes.

This uncanny object held a rifle in its grasp and it was the muzzle of this which touched Pious Peter's cheek, and sent chill after chill of terror coursing down his spinal column.

"Stop your yelling!" the figure said, "or you shall die like a dog!"

"Oh! yes, yes, yes—I'll stop—I'll beg—I'll beg," Peter declared, with chattering teeth.

"Don't shoot, an' I'll do anything you ask."

"You are wise. I am one who always am obeyed. I am Grim Goblin, the Avenger."

"Oh! good Heavings!" Peter gasped—"oh! oh!"

"Silence!" the Avenger ordered, sternly. "You need have no fear that I shall hurt you, if you do as I direct. See, here is a roll of papers;" and as he spoke he drew a roll from beneath his cloak, and cast them upon Peter's breast.

"They are posters or placards, printed in blood of mine enemies. Take them; mount your horse, and pursue your journey. You will arrive in the town of Deviltry at the dead of night. When you get there, I want you to post one of these posters upon the door of every saloon in the place. You can do this without being observed, and at the same time oblige me. Promise me faithfully to do this and I will let you go. Refuse, and I'll blow your brains out where you lay."

"Oh! Lordy a'mighty, yes—I promise—I promise anything," Peter gasped, wildly.

"Very well; I'll learn if you have done my bidding," Grim Goblin said, "and if you have not, it won't be many days before you'll be a ripe subject for a funeral."

Then, with a wild laugh he bounded away, and ere Peter could regain his feet, had disappeared from view.

It is unnecessary to add that the pious mail man did not pause to make any particular search for his visitor.

Instead, he gained his saddle as quickly as possible, put spurs to his animal, and tore madly away down the gulch as though a thousand devils were at his heels.

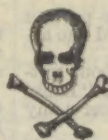
Neither right nor left did he look until the little camp hove in sight, and then he uttered a prayer of thanksgiving for his escape.

When the town awoke, the following morning, upon the door of every saloon and gambling house, Bijah Green's tavern included, was tacked a sheet of paper, inscribed in red ink or blood, of which the following is a fac-simile:—

"NOTICE.

"Take warning, all ye sinners of the camp called Deviltry, for Grim Goblin the Avenger is in your midst, and death shall follow where this notice is posted—death to all whose hands are dyed in blood of innocent humans.

"(Signed) GRIM GOBLIN, "Avenger."



Such was the notice that was read and re-read by startled groups, and sent a thrill of terror to many a miner's heart.

It wasn't an hour before the town was thoroughly aroused, and the street filled with an excited populace who came to read for themselves the terrible warning of the Avenger, a being whose very name was an ill omen in more than one of the Sierra Nevada mining districts.

Nobby Nick came down from his room, looking fresh and wide-awake after his night's repose, and took a look at the posters, while he smoked a cigar.

"I must see if I can't trap this Grim Goblin," he muttered, more to himself than for other ears. "He'd be quite a prize to capture. I wonder if a reward has been offered for him?"

"You bet thar has, young feller," a voice at his elbow said, and he turned to behold standing near him a little dried up specimen of humanity, bow-legged and humpbacked, and positively ugly of countenance—a buckskin-clad being, with stubby beard, long iron-gray hair and a game eye, who might or might not have been pronounced a human, according to the peculiar ideas of the observer. "You bet thar has, my larky," this shriveled up individual continued, with a grimace, "an' you kin bet also thet 'spicion ain't clear from yer shoulders, yet. They've got an eye on ye, hev ther people, watchin' fer somethin' ter confirm the 'spicion. Why, you didn't know et, my boy, but, 'twixt you an' I yer room was guarded all last night."

"Pshaw, you don't mean it!" Nick exclaimed, regarding the old man with a smile.

"Yas I do, sure! my name's Old Porcupine, an' I'm a sinner. Oh! y'd better keep yer peepers on 'em, fer they're bitter toward ye—that is, the tougher class. Another thing while I'm tellin' ye, y'd better not venture out o' sight till they are convinced who ye be."

"And why not?"

"Because I've hearn it sed thet ye couldn't leave the village alive, till et was fairly proven you weren't Grim Goblin."

"Oh! so this is the lay, eh?" Nick said, scratching his head. "Well, I'm much obliged for the warning, uncle. What's yer handle?"

"Old Porcupine at yer service," the old man said, doffing his hat. "Ye see as how I keeps the bank across the bridge on 'tother side the stream—me an' my 'dopted darter, Sue. Et was Sue ye reskied from the miserable rough, Evil Eph."

"Oh! it was?" with a stare of surprise.

"Yas, an' she sed as how I should tell ye she was mighty thankful to ye. I must be goin' now, or the folks 'cuse me o' connivin' wi' ye. Good-day to ye! Keep yer eye out. Ef ye happen 'cross stream, drap in."

"I dare say I shall," Nick muttered, as the little old man limped away. "But I shall keep my eyes about me, all the same, accordin' to your advice. If this is a nest of hornets they'll find they have the addition of a bumble-bee, maybe."

CHAPTER V.

DOGGED FOOTSTEPS.

As the day progressed, and he sauntered about the little mining town, Nobby Nick became more fully aware that he was the center of observation for all eyes—and another thing did not escape his keen notice: One or more men of the town never lost sight of him, as he could see them following, whenever he looked back. They were hardly ever the same men when he looked, but this did not deceive him of the fact that he was watched, as he rightly surmised that a change was made to ward off suspicion.

Even the women and little children regarded him with a suspicious stare, for they, too, had heard of him as the terrible avenger, Grim Goblin, whose name was a terror wherever spoken.

But Nick did not take the matter to heart as many would have done under the circumstances. Instead, he sauntered leisurely about the settlement, puffing away at a cigar and inspecting everything of interest as he went.

In the early part of morn, just before dawn, one of those sudden changes had taken place which are peculiar to this particular region. The mercury had risen rapidly, and the snow-storm turned into a drenching rain, which by day-dawn had cleared the valley of its winding-sheet of white.

Then the sun rose warmly above the mountain tops, and the air was balmy like an Indian summer day. The miners went to work on the placer claims, and a scene of general activity was everywhere.

One thing rather puzzled Nobby Nick. He could neither hear nor see anything of the two men he had disposed of so effectually the previous evening. They were not abroad, that was certain, nor did any one seem to know of their whereabouts, for inquiries were general.

During the course of his rambles he crossed the narrow foot-bridge that had been built over the stream from bank to bank, and was strolling along the opposite shore when he heard a foot-step and felt a hand laid softly upon his arm.

Turning, he beheld the maiden to whose rescue he had come the previous evening at the tavern.

She was attired in a pretty pink calico dress, with beaded slippers upon her feet, and wore her hair in a rippling wave down over her shoulders.

And very pretty she looked with the sunlight resting warmly upon her pretty face.

"I was told that you were the gentleman who came so bravely to my rescue last night," she said, flushing with hesitation, "and I came to thank you for your brave act. I trust I am not bold for so presuming to address you."

"Most assuredly not," Nick replied, doffing his hat gallantly. "Indeed, I was just meditating on calling on you, and thanking you for the opportunity afforded me to save so pretty a young lady from insult."

"Pshaw! you are inclined to flattery," Sandy Sue said. "That is out of place, as I am not even good looking; and I should think you would hate me for getting you into trouble."

"Ha! ha! that's nothing. I'm always in trouble with some one," Nick replied, smilingly. "Ten to one if I hadn't heard your appeal for assistance, I should have made my *entree* to the tavern in the same way I did, as I have a peculiar idea that dashing and independent first impressions rule the day."

"Perhaps; but, even though you may deem yourself safe, you had best look out," Sue warned, candidly. "You are feared by the majority of the citizens of the camp as a bold bravo, while the suspicion that you are the dread scourge, Grim Goblin, causes the people to regard you with aversion. You are watched at every turn, and should the least thing arise to confirm this suspicion, it would not be an hour ere the whole populace would be turned into a mob."

"With yourself included?" he queried.

"No, indeed! I'll stick by you. When others are bitter against you, I shall defend you!"

"Then you do not believe me to be the avenger?"

"No. You have too honest a face. This terrible man, Grim Goblin, must be a heartless wretch, with a dark, ugly face, distorted by the reflection of his bloody deeds."

"I thank you for your confidence," Nick said, warmly. "Things do begin to look rather squally for me, but I allow I'll wriggle out somehow. One thing is certain:—If they take Nobby Nick alive, they'll have to do it when he don't know anything about it."

"Sh! Talk lower," Sue said, looking straight in his face. "Don't look around yet. By and by glance carelessly toward the bridge. You will see two men there leaning on the railing."

"Well—?"

"They have been shaking their fists at me as a warning that I have no business to talk with you. If I provoke them it may be the worse for us both, so I will bid you good-day."

"Good-day! Accept my sincere thanks for your interest in my behalf, for I feel I have in you at least one friend among a host of foes. Shall I see you again?"

"When opportunity comes, and I can do so safely, I will find you," Sandy Sue replied.

Then, with a nod, she crossed the street and entered a well-built log cabin, over the door of which there was a little sign bearing the inscription:

"JOHN FALCONER, BANKER AND BROKER."

"Falconer," Nick muttered, reading the sign, and then turning and retracing his steps toward the bridge. "That must be the name of my young friend."

The two red-shirted, stogy-booted miners who had been lounging on the bridge also turned

toward the other side of the stream, when they saw Nick coming, but he hailed them in an authoritative tone.

"Hello! slow up there a bit," he said, commandingly, whereat they paused, hesitatingly. "What's your hurry? I want to see you!"

"Waal, what d'ye want?" one of the pair demanded, gruffly. "Reckon ye don't know us?"

"An' I reckon I haven't any particular bankerin' after yer acquaintance, either," the Nevadan retorted, with a provoking laugh. "But I'd like to inquire what satisfaction you get from dogging my footsteps!"

"We ain't bin doin' nothin' o' the sort."

"You lie! My movements are under constant surveillance, and you were watching me while I conversed with the young lady back yonder."

"Et don't matter. Them's our orders, an' we've got ter stick by 'em," the second man admitted, "an' ef you don't like 'em, why ye can chaw 'em."

"I'll chaw you, if you give me much of your tongue," the champion replied. "Who gave the orders to have me dogged?"

"S'pect it was Col. Bill Travers."

"Oh! so he's alive, eh? What business has he to order me watched?"

"Humph! What the colonel says is law, hyarabouts, an' thar ain't no man, woman or child as'll say he ain't boss. You'll find it out, too, when he git's ready to square up accounts with you."

"So he hasn't got enough yet, eh?"

"Guess not. A broken arm an' a smashed head won't bother ther colonel much, an' ef ye want any letterin' done on yer tombstone, ye'd better let out ther job, ter oncer."

"Many thanks for your unselfish advice," Nick retorted. "When I need a tombstone I'll have time to import one from the East. March along, now, before I am seized with a notion to tumble you over into the river."

The men obeyed without urging, for neither, after what they had seen of the Nevadan's prowess, cared to court a scrimmage with him.

Nick followed them back to the tavern, which he entered, and sought his room. To his surprise, he found the door unlocked, and on entering found that his apartment had another occupant than himself.

Not a man, but a woman, young and pretty, dressed in men's clothing—top boots, breeches, vest, white shirt and tie; jaunty jacket plumed slouch hat, all complete. She was seated comfortably in a rocking-chair, smoking a cigarette, and apparently enjoying herself.

Nobby Nick paused upon the threshold, and surveyed her with a stare of astonishment, not knowing whether to feel angry or amused at the intrusion.

Remarkably pretty was the intruder, both of face and of form, with well-rounded features, sparkling brown eyes, and hair to match which flowed down over her shoulders.

Her costume was of expensive material and fitted a well-contoured figure of medium height most charmingly.

Seeing that she did not offer to speak, and being in rather an awkward position Nobby Nick finally broke the ice by doffing his hat, gallantly.

"Excuse me, lady," he said, glancing at the interior of the apartment to make sure that he was right, "but haven't you made a mistake and got into the wrong room?"

"Not a bit of it," the girl-boy replied, independently. "I reckon I know what I'm about, young feller."

"Not doubting that," Nick replied, his astonishment increasing. "I beg to state that this was my apartment, if I am not very much mistaken!"

"You are not in the least mistaken," was the answer. "This is your room, so come in, shut the door, sit down, and be sensible."

Nick obeyed the first three orders, with alacrity, resolved to see the thing through.

As to the sensible part, he said, his composure returning to him, "I don't know about that. Perhaps if you would be kind enough to give your name, and explain in what way I am indebted for your unexpected visit, my senses may come to a more settled state."

"Oh! we'll get to that, directly," the girl replied, coolly. "This world wasn't made in one day, and yet it is a success. But, to begin with, how are you feeling, to-day?"

"Never felt better, I assure you."

"Glad to hear it. If you have a cigar join me in a smoke. I haven't an extra one myself. I see you've got yourself in an unenviable situation since your arrival here."

"If so, I am quite able to get myself out,"

Nick retorted, not altogether pleased with the "freshness" of his visitor.

"Don't be so sure about that. I have reason to have serious doubts of your ever getting out of the place. You barked up the wrong tree when you took hold of Col. Bill Travers. He's a bad man."

"So am I when they fool around me too much. So you are a friend of this border ruffian, eh?"

"By no means. But, who or what I am to you, it matters not. To you I would be a friend—more, a benefactor. I possess the power to get you out of town and to a place of safety."

"But, ain't you a little fast? I am not half ready to shake hands with Deviltry, yet, if I recollect myself."

"But stop! If you do not take advantage of opportunity and escape, ere five suns have come and gone, there will not be so much as a bone of you left to tell you were ever here."

"Ha! ha! ha! Your imagination would do credit to a novel writer," Nick laughed. "I fancy I shall know something in regard to this wholesale dissecting business about the time it is transpiring."

"Humph! you may be facetious now, but I fancy you will know more than you want to, of it, later," she returned with a faint smile. "Still, if you desire to take the consequences of your fool-hardiness, it is not my look-out."

"Decidedly. Supposing, however, I were to engage your services to conduct me to a place of safety—what remuneration would you expect?"

"Three species, namely: five hundred dollars which you carry in a belt beneath your hunting-shirt; your hand joined with mine in marriage; and last but not least, the secret of the exact location and entrance to the old Indian mine!"

As she spoke the woman leaned forward and gazed searchingly into the Nevadan's face, expecting evidently to note some great change or start in his manner, and her countenance fell when she noted none. Perfectly composed was this man of strength, no surprise even depicted upon his countenance.

"As to the money, no. As to marrying an unknown adventuress, emphatically no. And, as to the secret connected with some old Indian mine, you've tackled the wrong dictionary for a solution, I can tell you."

"You are lying to me. You and you alone, Ralph Arlington hold the secret!" the woman cried, rising to her feet, a wild glare in her eyes. "Deny it you dare not."

Still no expression of surprise upon the face of the pilgrim from Nevada.

Wars of emotion and alarm might have been raging within his bosom, but if so, he had the wonderful power of retaining an outwardly composed demeanor.

"I can deny it with the greatest of ease," was Nick's calm answer. "I know not who or what you are, madame, nor do I care. Your attempt to pump me of any knowledge you may wish to possess, is utterly without avail, and the sooner you take your leave, the greater will be my obligation to you. Your name I would, however, like to know."

"You may call me Moll McGregor, but that is not my name!" and she rose to depart. "Whatever my true name is, it does not matter to you; suffice to say that I am one who knows you well, and your past, and shall never lose sight of you, until I get possession of the key to the old Indian mine."

"If you wait that long, your hair will be snowy white!"

"By no means. If you will not have me as a friend, you shall have me as an enemy. I will plan to get you in my power, and then tear the secret from you, or tear out your heart."

"Very well. That will do for the present, and I'll excuse you now!" Nick said, pointing toward the door. "Go, now, and do not make yourself quite so forward henceforth."

She did go, but shook her fist at him as she vanished through the doorway.

"Remember!" she said, savagely; "this is not our last meeting."

After she had gone Nick lit a cigar, and sat meditatively eyeing the clouds of smoke which rolled ceilingward from his lips.

"I reckon I might better have stayed away from this place," he confessed, scratching his head, "as it appears that I am between several fires—one the populace who have set me down as an assassin—the other that eccentric female who apparently knows more about me than I know myself. I am fogged about her, for I cannot remember that I have ever met her."

He sat for over an hour, buried in deep thought, his brow wrinkled in a half-scowl at

though the nature of his meditations were not pleasant.

Finally his eyes closed, wearily, and he slept. It was some hours ere he awoke—at least the light in his room was dull and gloomy and he concluded that it was nightfall.

He awoke with a start, caused by a hubbub of noises without—the sound of voices and barks of dogs prevailing.

Rising and going to the window, he gazed down into the street below.

And here his eyes fell upon a sight which thrilled him in spite of himself.

The street was filled with the townspeople, who were talking clamorously, and pointing toward an object upon the extreme top of a pole carried by a burly miner.

This object, horrible to relate, was a man's head, detached from the body—a ghastly, bloody trophy, with distended jaws and protruding eyes—yet Nick knew he had seen the bearded face before, in the hotel disturbance.

Straight toward the hotel the trophy bearer came, closely followed by the yelling crowd, with weapons drawn.

What did it mean, the young Nevadan asked himself?

Was this a victim of Grim Goblin's vengeance? And were they coming for him, Nick, to answer for the crime?

It was a horrible thought.

CHAPTER VI.

UPRISING OF A POPULACE.

"I AM in a position that necessitates my doing something for my country, I should opine, if that crowd is any prognostication of coming events," he said, grimly. "I would like to know for certain if they are coming for me. If so, they'll not find me—that's certain. Their hand is decidedly too flush for me to attempt to raise it, and so I'll pass. The next important question is—where will I pass to?"

It was an important question with him to know how he was to get out of the dilemma that stared him ominously in the face.

Outside was the hooting, howling crowd, and he did not want any firmer conviction than that of his own senses, that they sought for him.

He took another glance from the window. The sun had gone down behind the hills, and a dusky gloom was creeping rapidly through the valley.

A look at the ghastly head perched on top of the pole—then Nobby Nick shut his teeth together with a snap, his eyes flashed resolutely, and he buckled his belt a notch tighter.

"I wonder where Doxy is!" he mused, glancing at his revolvers, to see that they were all right, and slinging his rifle to his back.

"If she was down there I'd set her on the mob. I'll bet a cracker she'd make some of 'em just their leather."

He was now ready for escape, as soon as he should find the avenue thereto.

Going to the door of his room he listened intently but could hear no one in the hall outside.

This hall ran the whole length of the upper story of the great cabin, and was intersected by numerous smaller passageways leading to the rooms below. The stairway leading to the bar-room below was located at the eastern end of the hall, while at the western end was a window looking out upon the gulch stream.

Leaving his room Nick stood for a moment hesitantly undecided which direction to go. Finally, however, he resolved to creep to the head of the stairs and listen to what was going on below.

He therefore stole stealthily along for a few steps—then suddenly paused, and retraced his steps rapidly and went to the western end of the hall. A thought had occurred to him in which there was reason.

He would remove the window sash from its frame—then, in case of necessity, he could make a run along the hall and jump from the window into the gulch stream, which only ran about ten feet from that end of the tavern.

The work of removing the window only occupied a couple of minutes; then, drawing one of his revolvers and cocking it, he crept cautiously toward the opposite end of the hall.

Without incident he reached the head of the stairs, and stood silently in the dark in a listening attitude.

Up from the bar below came angry voices, profane shouts and the clinking of glasses, and as he had had any doubts before as to the mission of the aroused populace, he had none now, for more than once he heard the name of Nobby Nick and Grim Goblin mentioned in connection, and gathered from snatches of conversation, that the murdered man was one Hank Long,

and had been killed by the Avenger, Grim Goblin, as was known by a familiar cross slashed with a knife upon the forehead. The body had not yet been found—the head had been discovered mounted on top of the pole, just out of the village in the center of the gulch.

All this was, of course, interesting to Nick, and he was resolved to learn every thing possible before he was forced to "light out" for liberty.

For a half an hour or more the hubbub continued, and during that time it was evident that considerable whisky changed hands, judging by the rattle of glasses.

Finally, there was a fearful racket made by pounding upon a tin pan, and all became quiet, proclaiming that a meeting was called.

With all attention Nobby Nick leaned forward to hear what was said. From his position he commanded a view of a portion of the scene below, and could see the speaker, who proved to be Col. Bill Travers, mounted upon an empty flour barrel.

A sorry looking orator he made, however. His left leg was bandaged, his left arm was in a sling, his right eye was tied up, and his face was bruised and raw in a dozen places.

He took the stand, and gazed around with the glare of a hungry wolf in his eyes, ere he spoke.

"Fellow citizens," he finally said, savagely, "I don't reckon I'm called on to say much. You all know that Grim Goblin, the cussed cut-throat, is among us, an' that we've jest found one bloody evidence of the fact, to-night. You are all well satisfied, too, that the young puppy who calls himself Nobby Nick is none other than the veritable Grim Goblin, and so what remains for us to do but capture the cuss, an' make him suffer for his crimes?"

"Hurrah! that's ther ticket to vote!" shouted Alaska Joe, who now calculated he was second thoroughbred of the town, since Evil Eph was sick. "Ef Nobby Nick is ther chap, Grim Goblin, why, et's our saintly duty ter clean him out. An' ef he ain't, I opine as how he ain't no pilgrim as will do any purticular credit to our moral town, an' et would not do any hurt ter use his bone-dust fer fertilizin' purposes."

"See heer, Alaska, you'd better shet yer yawn!" Col. Bill growled. "Ef ye ever stick in yer blab when I'm addressin a meetin', like this, ag'in, I'll be cussed ef I don't slip my knife in ter yer juggler vein. I say, Nobby Nick is the self-same Grim Goblin, or else an emissary of him, an' I fer one propose we don't parley any longer, but sail right in and capture him. Arter that, we kin hold a meetin' an' devise a plan o' puttin' him to death. All in favor of this motion make manifest by sayin' I!"

A general yell of "I!" was the answer. "As I expected," Col. Bill said, with a grin of approbation. "You all like this chap about as much as I do. Now the next thing is to get him. Ef I'm elected captain of the thing, I'll give ye plans by which we kin take the cuss."

"Hurrah! hurrah!" shouted the crowd. "Colonel Bill is ter be ther boss."

"Then, first of all, let twenty able bodied men surround the building on all sides, with weapons ready for use," Travers said. "If our man is in the shebang and makes an attempt to escape, fire upon him; do not let him get away if you have to kill him."

The order was executed, some two score of the crowd swarming to the outside of the building.

"Next, let two men creep cautiously upstairs, and to the door of the Avenger's room, and listen there. If you hear anything of him, come and report. If not, give the alarm, and there shall be a general search of the premises."

Two burly miners immediately signified their readiness to make the reconnaissance, and put fresh cartridges in their revolvers, preparatory for battle, if necessary.

Then they came to the foot of the stairs, and began to ascend them in a stealthy manner.

Crouching behind a back-set in the wall, at the head of the stairs, Nobby Nick waited for them, his eyes gleaming desperately. He was resolved to hold his own as long as practicable, and then make a bold leap for liberty.

One of the men paused upon the steps, halfway up, to tighten his belt—the other came steadily on, and gained the landing.

The next instant he found himself in the iron grasp of the modern Hercules, and ere he could defend himself was raised in the air above his opponent's head, like a helpless child. Then without warning, he suddenly hurled the victim of his surprise down the stairway against the second miner, and the two went crashing

headlong to the bottom, mid cries of consternation from the crowd in the bar-room.

Uttering a yell of defiance, and without waiting to note the effect of his bold deed, Nobby Nick turned and ran swiftly through the hall toward the western end of the building, intent upon leaping through the open casement into the gulch stream.

But, this plan was suddenly foiled, for he had only gone about half the distance to the window when he tripped upon a wire or rope strung across the floor, and fell with stunning severity, and, before he could even make the attempt to regain his feet, a figure darted forward, sprang upon him and bore him back, and ere he fully regained his wits, his wrists were handcuffed and a bandage tied over his eyes.

"Now rise to your feet, quickly," a voice spoke, close to his ear—a feminine voice, and that. "Do not attempt to run, but come with me, and I'll get you away from the mob. Listen! they are coming. This way, now, lively!"

She grasped him by the arm and led the way rapidly; and he followed, not too willingly, for he knew not whether he was going out of the fire or deeper into it.

She led the way for perhaps fifteen paces through the main hall—then made a sharp turn, and he knew that the route lay through one of the several narrower passages. Another turn was soon made, this time into a room, evidently, for he heard her close a door behind them.

"Stop here a moment," she said, "while I procure a light. 'We will be safe until I take you to a still safer place.'"

He obeyed, while he listened to her as she moved about the apartment.

Her step was light, soft, cat-like.

Who was she, he asked himself?

Moll Mc Gregor, perhaps!

No, not she, he deliberated, for the voice was of a different tone—softer and more gentle. She soon succeeded in striking a light, and then came forward and removed the bandage from his eyes. It was a decided relief, for he was eager to know whom he had to thank for his rescue from the mob.

And he saw standing before him not a white girl—not Sandy Sue, as he had half hoped—but an Indian girl of some sixteen or seventeen summers—a well-formed maiden of medium height of women, with a face nearly as white as a native pale-face, regular and remarkably attractive features, dark eyes whose power of expression was dazzling, and hair black as a raven's wing, and worn down her back in two braids.

She was attired in buckskin leggings reaching above the knee, and met by a neat-fitting hunting-shirt belted at the waist, which was also of buckskin, and all of which was fringed with the down of the eagle, colored or painted in the many shades of the rainbow. Beaded moccasins upon her feet, and a jaunty round fur cap upon her head completed a very tasty costume, which contributed to make her a very pretty girl. But for the dusky expression of her eyes, and the faint tinge of brown to her skin, one would not have suspected that she was an Indian, for her features were of an Anglo-Saxon type.

As he gazed at her in mute surprise and admiration, a thought flashed across the Nevadan's mind.

Of the three pretty females he had met since coming to Devilry, which was the prettiest—this Indian maiden, Sandy Sue, or Moll Mc Gregor?

And he was not prepared to answer, for all three were pretty to a fault.

"I am Wild Flower the daughter of Stern Face, the banished Sioux," she said, breaking the silence. "You saved my father from the vengeance of the gulch miners, and he liked you. He dreamt you were in trouble and sent me to help you escape."

"For which I thank you heartily," Nick said, extending his hand. "I did give the old chief a lift, or rather, my old mule, Doxy did, but I didn't reckon there'd be any chance o' returning the favor so soon."

Wild Flower hesitated a moment, and then seized his left hand, and examined the palm closely.

As suddenly then did she drop it and reel back, a shade of pallor crossing her countenance, and her own shapely right hand dropping to the butt of a revolver which she carried in her belt.

"Hold on—what's the matter, now?" Nick demanded, in surprise. "What's the matter with my fist that you are so affected?"

"Sh! Your life is in deadly peril, if Stern Face sees that hand," she gasped. "Not even the favor you did him would save your life."

"And why not? I'll be shot if I ain't fogged, for once in my life."

"Perhaps. Maybe you are ignorant of the secret that envelops your life, but I am not. Did you ever study the veins of your left hand—not veins that blood circulates through, but marks that seem to have been seared there by the hand of nature and which look like a labyrinth of trails on a prairie?"

"In truth I have studied my marked palm, many times, in curiosity, but never allowed there was any particular meaning connected therewith," Nick replied.

"There is a meaning, however," Wild Flower assured, "and one which I can well understand. By that marked hand I know who you are, your whole antecedents, and that you are the last of a race of people who know the secret of the old Indian mine."

"You are mistaken. I know nothing concerning any Indian mine."

"Maybe not, but the trail leading to that mine is engraved upon your hand, and there are hundreds who would give their right hands to gain possession of the secret!"

Then she stopped short, and listened intently. Sharp though were the ears of the Nevadan, he could hear no outside sound, for the room was apparently without doors or windows, none being visible.

Wild Flower heard hostile sounds, however, for her big yes grew duskier, and she reproduced the bandage which had previously served as a blindfold.

"We must escape further, lest they scent us out," she announced. "We are safe unless they think of one thing. Col. Travers has a bloodhound, and if he were to set it on our trail it would be bad. Come!"

"Where?"

"It matters not, to you, just yet. I will blindfold you, and lead the way—a long and tedious one, it will seem. By and by we will pause to rest, and Wild Flower will tell you something of the story concerning the mystery that surrounds you. Come!"

She bandaged his eyes, and taking him by the arm led him forward.

A few paces thus; then they began to descend what he concluded was a narrow and winding staircase.

It proved to be of extreme length ere they came to the end of the steps, the lower portion of which proved to be stone.

They were now in a damp, musty-smelling place which his senses of smelling and feeling told him was a subterranean passage.

CHAPTER VII. THE BANK BESIEGED.

IMMEDIATELY after the two miners came headforemost down into the bar-room, propelled thither by the mighty power of Nobby Nick's terrible arms, there was a loud yell of vengeance, and fully a hundred rough and lawless men sprang up the staircase, armed with drawn revolvers, and lighted by burning fagots which they had grabbed from the fire-place.

Col. Bill Travers was too lame to lead the van, but brought up the rear, urging on the gang whose ruling spirit he was.

A swift and thorough search of the upper story was made—in every room, hallway and niche, and the result was nothing!

Nowhere could anything of the Nevadan be found, but the open window at the end of the hall pointed out the avenue of his escape.

Disappointed howls and curses escaped the searching miners, and a rush was made for the outer air, some descending the stairs, and others leaping recklessly from the window.

On being sharply questioned, none of those who had formed the guard surrounding the cabin, had seen anything of the supposed avenger, and declared emphatically that he had not escaped through the window by leaping over their heads.

Loth to believe this were the larger share of the populace—even Colonel Bill raved and swore around like a madman, and ordered every house and building of any description ransacked.

And his order was obeyed.

The mob divided up into several companies, and, armed with torches began to search the town.

Colonel Bill hobbled and limped along at the head of one gang, and led the way across the river to the cabin-bank of Porcupine Pete, formerly owned by John Falconer.

Here he paused, and rapped smartly upon the door, which was partly opened by Sandy Sue, whose pretty face and figure filled the gap.

"Come, gal, open up, an' let us s'arch the place," Travers said, gruffly, pushing on the door. But Sue held it firmly.

"No you don't," she said, "till I know what you want."

"Durn ye, open the door! We're s'archin' fer that infernal cuss, Nobby Nick," he replied, savagely. "He's slipped away, like a greased eel, an' we want see ef ye ain't got him hid away somewheres."

"He ain't here, and you can't come in. The bank is closed for to-day."

"Oh! but we'll cussed soon open it, tho', ef ye don't let us in."

"Then blaze away, and you'll get your fill, mighty quick!" Sue retorted spiritedly. She was a resolute girl, one not easily frightened, and she slammed the door in Col. Bill's face, with a will, after which she barred it heavily.

"There! now stay out!" she cried, in a determined tone. "Nobby Nick is not here, and you can save time by searching for him elsewhere."

"I'll be cussed ef we will," Travers roared, enraged at his defeat. "Boys, go out and trim a good tree, for a battering-ram, an' we'll devilish soon make splinters of the door."

A dozen sprang to do his bidding, while the rest stood guard around this strong cabin.

"Oh! but I'll spoil yer purty face, when I get in thar," the valiant colonel yelled, limping about. "I'll cut yer head off an' stick it a-top of a pole like Hank Long's."

Sue did not reply.

She was alone in the cabin, Porcupine Pete having been absent on a hunt in the mountains since noon, and she did not feel that it was policy for her to provoke these rude citizens too much—yet was determined they should not enter the cabin at any hazard.

For, though she knew nothing of the whereabouts of Nobby Nick, she did know that there was wealth enough in the iron safe to tempt more honest men than Travers and his gang.

"Ye'd better let us in," Travers growled, from a position near the door. "The boys are cutting a tree, over yonder, an' we'll batter thunder out of yer door ef ye don't open it."

"Batter away!" Sue replied, firmly. "I guess it will require a deal of pains for you to get in here, and even when successful in so doing, you'll fail to find the object of your search. I warn you fairly not to attack this cabin. If you do, I'll shoot every man I get a glimpse of, sure as I am Sandy Sue."

"Oh! we ain't afeard o' ye! We've heerd squaws talk, before."

Presently the tramp of feet announced that the bearers of the battering-ram were returning, as did a babel of discordant voices.

"Come, now," the hoarse voice of Colonel Bill shouted, "ef ye're goin' to open up, do so—ef ye ain't say so, and we'll make pudding of yer old cabin."

"I have told you repeatedly I shall not open the door," Sue returned. "If you resort to violence you do so at your peril."

A yell of defiance came from the outside; then there was a tremendous thump against the stout oaken door, which shook the cabin from roof to foundation.

But, the door did not yield.

Taking down a light repeating rifle, of the Winchester pattern, Sue stationed herself at a loop-hole in the wall, and waited, resolved that as the cabin was attacked, she would show fight, in dead earnest.

The cabin was admirably adapted for standing a siege, the walls being built of three thicknesses of logs, and the roof doubly boarded and very steep, making it impossible for any one to stand upon it.

Within, it was divided into two rooms below, the door by which entrance could be gained opening into the bank, while from that a door opened into a side room which was used for kitchen and dining room. Sleeping apartments were up-stairs, under the roof. The windows of the cabin were well protected by stout iron shutters, and altogether it was a snug little fort.

Surrounded as she was by these formidable barriers, Sandy Sue felt little or no fear as to what the final result would be, for with her father she had settled here when a mere child, and when Indians were hostile, and she could remember more than one occasion when the stanch little edifice had withstood the ingenious attack of the wily savages, for days.

Cocking the rifle she leveled the weapon through the loop-hole. The next instant there was a flash, a sharp report—and a yell.

The yell told that the shot had taken effect, and howls of rage among the self-styled Regulators proved it.

"Open ther door, you she-wildcat!" Colonel Bill howled.

"Never!" came the response from the inside,

followed by a shot which dropped another miner.

Then the battering-ram was applied with a will.

At first the door withstood the shocks bravely, but the continued attack finally began to make it clatter noisily and show signs of giving in.

Encouraged by this, the men with battering-ram lent renewed efforts, and made the night hideous with their yells.

Shot after shot came from within the cabin, with telling effect, which increased the fury of the Regulators, for they could not handle their clumsy weapon of assault.

Thump! bang! crash!—the door shook visibly, the bars burst in twain. Another thump and the door went in with a loud crash.

Cheer after cheer rent the air as the men dropped the log and poured into the cabin.

Later that same night, when the moon was soaring down toward its western bed, a stage came dashing down through Hard Pan gulch; not a public conveyance, evidently, but a private hack drawn by four handsome white horses, and driven by a liveried dandy, who sat upon the box.

Who was inside could not be seen from the exterior, both doors being closed and the curtains drawn.

The moonlight fell dimly in the gulch, but it was still light enough for the coachman to see, and he drove rapidly and seemingly recklessly. His constant glances about him bespoke the nervousness he felt, probably owing to the hour and his lonely surroundings, and his left hand ever hovered near his belt.

The trail through the gulch lay all the way down hill toward Deviltry, and this fact accelerated the speed of the horses until the conveyance tore along at a furious speed.

Yet this fact did not seem to alarm five bearded men who were drawn up in a line across the trail, a few hundred yards further down the gulch—dark, rough-looking fellows, with great brass letters upon their hunting shirts, and cocked revolvers in their hands.

Sternly the leader called out the challenge word "Halt!" as the turnout came nearer, and the dandy, on seeing them, promptly drew rein, and allowed them to approach.

"See yar now, you fellows, w'at youh want, a-stoppin' folkses dis yar way?" he demanded, leveling his big navy revolver at the foremost of the outlaws. "Jes' you 'plain, sah, or I'll goin' to bore a hole right away froo youh, fo' suah!"

"Git out, you infernal nigger!" the chief replied, savagely. "Drop that weapon, or we'll blow ye so fur you never 'll find even the color of yer black hide. As to what we want, we're the Bearded Brothers, and we want the bloated old aristocrat, General Arlington, who is aboard this stage."

"Oh! de good Lcr' bress you, but you's too late, fo' suah," Pompey replied, throwing up his hands. "Dis yar hack has been attacked by robbers free miles up de gulch, sure's I see a live nigger, and de general an' all his gold jes' taken right away off into de mountings, fo' suah! An' de general he say 'Pomp, fer heaven's sake go on to de town, an' send some one to my 'sistance.' Yes, sah, de general is done gone fo' fact."

An exclamation of dismay escaped the Bearded Brothers, and Captain A uttered a frightful string of curses.

"I'm cussed ef I don't believe you're lyinz, you infernal black skunk. Open the carriage door, boys, an' see ef the old chap ain't in thar!"

Several of the men sprang to obey his bidding, and as a result, both doors were flung wide open.

"Gone, sure enough!" the captain growled, flashing the light of a bull's-eye lantern within the vehicle. "Cuss the luck, the nigger is right."

"Done tole you so," Pompey declared, triumphantly. "Guess dis nigger knows when he's tellin' de gospel trufe, or not."

"What's ter be did?" one of the men demanded, whose arms ached from holding the snorting horses by the bits. "Shall we let him go on, or not?"

"Yes, cuss him, let loose the horses and leave him go on!" Captain A growled. "We've got in our bid too late, to-night."

The horses were accordingly released, and the carriage rolled away toward Deviltry.

And then it was that a panel in the front part of the interior of the cab was shot aside, and a tall white-whiskered man stepped forth from a

secret compartment wherein he had been hiding, with a satisfied smile upon his face.

At the rush of the Regulators into the bank or cabin home of Sandy Sue, the brave girl brought the steel barrel down upon the heads of those who darted forward to secure her, but a score of hands seized her as in a grasp of iron. Resistance was out of the question, and nothing was left for her but to submit.

"Bind her securely, and take her to the jail cabin," Colonel Bill ordered, slapping her roughly beside the head. "Ef we don't stretch her purty throat in the mornin' I'm a liar!"

The order was obeyed, and Sue taken to a strong cabin on the opposite side of the stream, where she was locked up in a cheerless room, with gratings over the window, and left alone.

At the bank part of the crowd busied themselves in caring for those who had been wounded by the prowess of the brave girl, while the others made a thorough search of the premises, without, of course, discovering any thing of Nobby Nick.

Nor was he found elsewhere by the other searchers, and it had to be given up that he had made good his escape.

About midnight Colonel Bill and five of his comrades left the town on horseback, declaring their intention to search the mountains, but they returned about daylight without their man.

The settlement was thoroughly aroused again by sunrise, for it was understood that Sandy Sue was to have a hasty trial, and that in all probability she would be lynched for the crime of killing two of the citizens who had joined in the attack upon the cabin.

A large crowd assembled upon a square near the river, where all public trials were usually held, and about two hours after sunrise the maiden was placed upon the stand, along with a lawyer and Colonel Bill Travers.

This lawyer was a ruffian as well as Travers, and things looked dark for the girl, for not a friendly expression was there upon the sea of faces that surrounded her, and she could not see even the rough visage of her guardian and protector, Porcupine Pete.

Colonel Bill arose pompously.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have the honor of opening this court," he said. "The case is one of murder, committed upon two of our most respectable citizens by a mere chit of a girl, here. We are assembled here to try her for the crime. No particular trial is required. She openly refused us admittance to her cabin, when in the name of the law we sought for a notorious criminal, and boldly killed two of our men when we took measures for obeying the mandates of the law. Now if there is any law to protect her, let us hear it!"

"There is no law on the side of the prisoner in such a case," Daviltry's disciple of Blackstone declared, "and I make no hesitation in pronouncing her guilty of murder in the first degree, and sentencing her to such death as may suit the people."

"I propose she be put up as a target, an' be shot at by every one as wants to," Travers said. "All in favor of this motion make manifest by saying I!"

There was a general shout of acclamation, on all hands.

Such a thing would be a novelty.

"Hold on. I protest!" a well-dressed stranger with long white beard said, stepping forward. "I want to purchase this prisoner!"

CHAPTER VIII.

WILD FLOWER NARRATES.

To return to Nobby Nick, whom we left somewhere beneath the earth, as he judged by the dank smell and feeling of what little air circulated through the place.

A halt was made, and Wild Flower pushed him gently backward to a seat upon a square rock at one side of the passage.

"Be seated," she said, seating herself beside him, "and we will rest awhile, while I talk with you. I like you very much."

"I thank you for it," Nick replied, "without knowing why you should."

"Because I do. You are the only white man I ever fancied, because you are strong, fearless, handsome, noble. Then, too, the mark upon your hand draws you nearer to me. Presently, I will explain all this which seems to be a mystery to you. But first, let me inquire what brings you here to the mines? You surely must have had an object in coming."

"Certainly. I am here for a purpose. But, how do I know that you are one whom I can safely intrust with my secret?"

"When the Indian girl offers her hand it is in undying friendship and faith. Here—I offer you my hand, swearing that I am ever to be trusted by you."

Nick received the hand in his and pressed it warmly. It was soft, shapely, and warm, and he felt a magnetic influence from its contact with his own.

"I am proud to earn you as a friend, Wild Flower," he said, raising the hand to his lips and then releasing it, "and will tell you what brings me here. I am sent by the U. S. Marshal of this territory, to spy out and find the rendezvous of a certain band of forgers who are known to be quartered somewhere in this section. I have followed the business of Government spy, for some time, and came here supposing I should be able to pursue my calling without trouble."

"You come on a good mission, and I am glad. These forgers do exist in this section, and I can give you considerable information concerning them. They undoubtedly exist in a party of outlaws known as the Bearded Brothers, and whose ruling spirit is a woman, unknown by real name, to them, who always keeps her face masked. She, I believe, is the author of the forgeries, and these Bearded Brothers pursue a double calling of disposing of the forgeries, and attacking lone mountain wayfarers for the purpose of robbing them."

"Hut this is good news to me. Where are they located? Where is their retreat?"

"That I do not care to tell. I stumbled upon it one night, and saw enough to convince me of what I have told you. They caught me, however, and would have cut my throat had I not promised never to reveal the whereabouts of their den to any human being. They made the clause, and I agreed to it."

"Then, in order to get possession of the knowledge, I have to commit matrimony, eh?"

"It would seem so, if you hoped to get your news of me."

"Well, well! I shall have to think this matter over, seriously. It may not be a bad plan, anyhow, providing the party of the second part is willing. But, now, tell me what is the secret of my branded hand, and why would your father be angry were he to see it?"

Wild Flower was silent a few moments—then she went on to relate:

"Years ago, sir, to begin with, my father Stern Face, a half-breed, and your father, John Falconer, became acquainted in Texas, and formed a partnership to come to this section of country and explore for gold. They came hither and explored and found gold, sure enough. They built a cabin and lived together, mined together, hunted together, and were the best of friends. Finally, Stern Face signified his intention of building him a cabin and bringing his wife and child hither. And his decision proved identical with one Falconer had formed, and so both the parties journeyed hence and brought back their families—Stern Face, his pale face wife and little daughter, and John Falconer, a little son and daughter—their mother having died while en route from the East."

"A year passed by. The two parties were growing rich, and settlers began to string in, one by one, forming the beginning of a little mining city, when one day Stern Face discovered some writings upon the stone that lay over an Indian mound, which disclosed to him the secret of an ancient subterranean Indian gold mine, which secret had been written on the stone in signs and had remained unknown since the Indian's death. My father unearthed the mine, explored it, and found it to be one of the richest this country ever had known."

"In the spirit of his loyalty to John Falconer he took him into the secret, and as a partner in the new fortune."

"It was then they took an oath that the secret of the whereabouts of the mine should never go beyond their present family, and sealed that oath with a taste of blood. They then branded their left hands, and those of their family with a die made by Stern Face, which marked out the topography of the surrounding country, and the secret entrance to the Indian mine—this was done as a sort of link binding the two families together."

"Well, in the due course of time they had taken out really more wealth than they cared to have lying around loose lest it arouse suspicion; so, as the town began to increase, John Falconer built a bank and started a general banking business—more as an object to secrete the gold of the Indian mine, than anything else, until he and Stern Face should come to some decision how to invest their wealth; and while

Falconer attended the bank and guarded the gold, Stern Face secretly mined it.

"One day John Falconer took a trip to an Eastern town, and when he returned brought back a wife—a mere girl of sixteen, with a pretty, babyish face and snaky, beedlike eyes. Stern Face did not like her, as he read treachery in her eyes, and so he warned John Falconer not to let her into the secret of the mine, and a promise was given."

"They did not agree together, Stern Face says—that is, John and his new wife, and his home knew not the peace it did before. John was often despondent and moody and strange. One night Stern Face returned to his cabin, to find his little girl crying bitterly, saying 'mamma had gone.' In surprise he went over to Falconer's, and there found his little girl in the same condition, she too saying that her mamma had gone. Search revealed that John Falconer had left, that afternoon, for the East, accompanied by his young son, and that his wife and Stern Face's wife had not long after taken the same trail, on horseback. Searching the bank, Stern Face found all gone—his own gold, John Falconer's gold and the gold that had been deposited by miners—gone! and who had taken it?"

"He could form but one conclusion. John Falconer had sloped with the gold, accompanied by his wife and my mother, as accessories to the crime. It maddened the honest old chief beyond comparison. He did not take the trail in pursuit, but registered an oath to have the life's blood of every one whose left hand bore the branded key to the secret mine. He, however, excepted me, his own child, and the innocent little one John Falconer had left behind. Over her he appointed Old Porcupine, a scout, as guardian; then took me and our household into the Indian mine. Here he has since lived, watching and waiting for the time when some of the guilty ones should return to this vicinity."

"Then my name is Falconer, and not Arlington, and I am the brother of the young lady they call Sandy Sue?" Nick exclaimed, excitedly.

"You are. Did you suppose your name was Arlington?"

"Yes—or rather I was called Nobby Nick over at the fort in Nevada, where my first recollections date back to when I was aged ten years. From that time on, to the present, I shifted for myself, around through territories, knowing little or nothing as to my antecedents, and caring less. That's my history in a nutshell."

"You are Nick Falconer; I knew that the minute I saw your hand," Wild Flower declared.

"And so when we were little shavers, we used to play together? Well, well! stranger things have happened, to be sure. So you think your stern old father would be likely to feel scalpishly disposed toward me, were he to find out my identity?"

"In truth he would. His anger even I could not stay."

"Well, then, I've got to keep this left fist out of his reach."

"You have. But I think I can manage it. He thinks the world of you, as Nobby Nick his rescuer, and bade me secure you and make you a guest of the Indian mine, first sealing your lips with a terrible oath binding yourself to secrecy. This oath I have not demanded of you, because I trusted in you, implicitly."

"And you can bet your life that your trust shall not be misplaced!" Nick assured, warmly. "The sin of the parents shall not follow the son."

"Bravely spoken—words that fill Wild Flower's heart with gladness and love for you. Stern Face shall not harm you. Wild Flower will fix your hand in a sling, for the present, and Stern Face will see that it has been hurt and ask no questions. Let Nick remain here a few minutes, till I return with some bandages."

She then skipped lightly away, and was absent a few minutes, when she returned with some strips of cloth and bound up his left hand in a sling, as if it had been wounded.

"I have just been wondering," Nick remarked, when she had finished, "where you get all your education and refined manners, living as you always have in the wilds here, away from schools and society."

"Stern Face is a man of some culture. Though a half-breed, he received an excellent education, and then his wife, my mother, was an American lady of intelligence and good breeding. My father has been my instructor, and to him I owe such knowledge as I have

not learned from experience and reading. Though the taint of Indian blood is in my veins, my heart is as white and my education nearly as perfect as that of my white sister."

"So I perceive. But tell me one thing:—do you know who is this Avenger who styles himself Grim Goblin, and for whom I have been mistaken in the mining town?"

"I often have suspicions, but sometimes believe them wrong. I neither give them credence nor publicity. Who Grim Goblin is, is destined to remain unknown. He is undoubtedly some person who has been deeply wronged by the ruffian element upon whom he ever preys. He has never been known to attack any of our peaceably-disposed citizens of the mines. It has always been that class whom dissipation or evil natures had transformed into wretches of the worst order. But come now, and we will go on to the end of our journey."

She linked her arm in his, and led the way along through the strange subterranean passage, which, by its formation, Nick judged had one day been an underground water-course. She had removed the bandage from his eyes, yet the darkness was so intense that he could not see his hand before his face.

"One entrance to this mine is then through the tavern?" he inquired, as they went along.

"Yes. One of the queer gables, supposed to be solid, is in reality hollow, and contains a room and spiral staircase, descending to this old water-course, which connects with Phosphorus Cave, which is the main chamber of the old Indian mine."

They soon emerged into what was evidently the very cave. It was a huge subterranean chamber, with high rocky walls and vaulted ceiling, and rugged, uneven bottom, and these rocky walls seemed to emit a peculiar bluish-white glow, which had the effect of lighting the cavern throughout.

The center of the bottom sloped off into a narrow ravine, through which a little rivulet of water gurgled along, entering through a black, tunnel-like fissure at one side of the cave, and disappearing through a similar one on the opposite side. There was fall enough in the stream so that an admirable system of sluice-boxes and cradles had been arranged in its course, making the washing of minerals an easy matter.

On the opposite side of the ravine was a portable engine and an ore mill or crusher, all in working order.

On the side of the ravine where they had passed there was little but rock and sand. Down in the ravine three Indian lodges had been built, not over half a dozen yards apart, and before one of these a fire of pine cones was burning, and an Indian was engaged in roasting some meat.

One thing puzzled Nobby Nick: how had the engine and crusher ever been conveyed to this secret avenue? He asked the question of Wild Flower, and she laughed gayly.

"Oh! they had it here at Deviltry before the Indian mine was discovered, and after discovery made pretense of selling it, but in reality removed it hither, by another route. Come; Stern Face is yonder preparing supper."

She led the way down a rocky path into the ravine, and Nick followed, watching her graceful figure, admiringly. He was beginning to feel a keen interest in her, short though had been their acquaintance.

Stern Face strode forward when he saw them approaching, and put out his hand, which Nick accepted. "Stern Face is glad to see pale-face brave," he said, motioning Nick to a seat on a camp-stool. "He is glad to see Nick come with Wild Flower. Nick brave man—Wild Flower good Indian girl. Nick and Wild Flower make good match—then Stern Face give 'em all his gold—big heap like mountain. Go East den—lib like nabobs. Stern Face like that—like to live in Washington an' be big man like President!"

And Nick's spoken thoughts were: "I wouldn't mind that, myself."

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAN FROM DENVER.

ABOUT the same hour in the morning that the trial of Susie Falconer was occurring in the town of Deviltry, Evil Eph had a visitor.

The ruffian made his home in an old tumble-down cabin, down the gulch, where the pines grew dark and gloomy, and to this cabin he had kept closely since his rough usage at the hands of Nobby Nick. In his terrible fall that night he had sustained such injuries as a fractured shoulder blade, a broken rib, a badly bruised head, and a dislocated knee, and was now yet unable

to more than crawl about his cabin and get what food and medicine he actually needed.

He had partly risen, this morning, upon his elbow on the couch, and was puffing away at his pipe when there came a rude knock on the door that made it rattle.

He started upright with an oath but sunk quickly back with pain.

The knock was immediately repeated with a peremptoriness that spoke of the knocker's impatience.

"Come in, cuss ye!" Saunders growled, reaching for his revolver, but failing to find it in its accustomed place.

The door opened, and a man entered.

Or at least a person of rather small stature, with an immense beard that fell down over the breast, and which hid a view of all of the face except the nose and eyes and forehead.

His belt fairly bristled with weapons, too, and, taken as a whole, he was not a person of prepossessing appearance. Evil Eph did not seem to recognize him, either, for he gave vent to a snort of rage at sight of him. "Who're you an' what the devil d'ye want?" he demanded.

"I am Grim Goblin, the Avenger, and I seek your money and your life," was the stranger's matter-of-fact reply.

Saunders uttered a gasp of alarm.

"You lie!" he gritted. "You are not the bloody Avenger."

"He, and none other!" the man replied, seating himself near the door, with a drawn revolver. "I rejoice in the honor of being that noted person who seldom appears in public yet quite often makes his presence felt. You being one of the allotted few in this town, who happen to be entered upon my Death Register, I thought I'd call around and settle up with you. Where is your gold concealed?"

"All I've got's in my pocket, an' 'thar ain't but cussed little o' that," Evil Eph growled.

"Oh! it won't avail you to lie to me," Grim Goblin assured. "I know you have upward of ten thousand in greenbacks and gold, else I should not have asked you."

The next instant, without any warning whatever, he raised his revolver and fired upon the border ruffian.

One bullet—that was enough.

It had pierced the forehead of Evil Eph, and he sunk back upon the couch with only a gasp—dead.

With a horrible laugh the Avenger restored the revolver to his belt; then he began a search of the cabin, overhauling such things and ransacking such places as were likely to contain hidden wealth.

In one corner a huge stuffed wolf stood with distended jaws and glassy eyes. It had been Eph's pride, this animal. Gazing at the brute a moment, a thought seemed to strike Grim Goblin, and he thrust his hand down the wolf's throat.

He then uttered a cry of joy, and throwing the stuffed animal upon the floor, slashed open its hide with his knife. Then through the aperture, he handed out handful after handful of bank-notes and coin and dust, and transferred the same to his own pockets.

When all was secured he hurried from the cabin.

To return to the village and the scene therein, in which Sandy Sue was a prominent figure.

A murmur of surprise escaped the crowd at the words of the stranger, whose fine garments, silk hat and jewelry seemed to indicate that he was well able to buy several prisoners.

A black scowl came upon the face of Colonel Bill Travers, for he scented in the new-comer a powerful adversary.

"Who are you?" he growled, gruffly. "Evidently some snob or ye'd know we don't turn trials into auctions up in this hyar country."

"My name is General Joseph Arlington at your service, a noted Denver financier!" was the reply, whereat there was more than one in the crowd who started. "I just arrived, and finding the young lady yonder in trouble, I propose to extricate her by purchasing her liberty, and making her a present of it. What price do you set upon her head?"

"A cussed sight more'n you kin pay, I'll allow," Travers replied, with a sneer. "The price upon her head is the lives of two men whom she shot last night, when we was tryin' ter git inter her cabin to search it."

"Humph!" the Easterner said, shifting a pair of gold rimmed glasses to his nose, and taking out a note-book and pencil. "I s'pose these fellows, like you, were worth their weight in gold."

"On course they were!" Colonel Bill replied, gruffly. "They was bully fellows, an' we don't purpose to let ary female or female mortal stan' up an' decrease ther population of this hyar town, like Sandy Sue has bin doin'."

"What was the aggregate weight of these two ruffians?" the general demanded, posing his pencil.

"Cuss you, what's it your business?" Travers roared, getting mad. "S'pose they weighed 'bout three fifty, but I don't reckon you'd better stick in yer blab around heer if you don't want to git knifed."

"I shall take care of myself, never you fear," the general replied, calmly, and at the same time figured with his pencil. "The aggregate weight of these men you say was three hundred and fifty pounds. Let me see: gold is sixteen dollars a Troy ounce, or one hundred and ninety-two dollars a Troy pound. These men's lives, counting them worth their weight in gold, would be in the region of thirty-six thousand dollars each, or seventy odd thousand, all told. I have a fifty thousand dollar draft in my pocket on an Eastern bank, which I will give for the young lady's release."

"Oh! no! no! no! do not do this, I beg of you!" she cried, imploringly. "Keep your money and let them do their worst. I am not worth so much money."

"No, ner ye wouldn't escape death, gal, ef he was ter offer a hundred thousand for you!" Col. Bill growled. "Ye may as well shet up, old white-whiskers, fer yer stamps is out of place in this crowd."

"Not so!" General Arlington replied. "It appears evident that you have run the town heretofore, my friend, but I'll allow your days are over. I'll divide ten thousand dollars among the first fifty able-bodied men who will step forward and back me, and help to clean out this domineering, ruffianly, one side element, and release the girl, who it appears was but acting on the natural principles of self-defense. These men are to also back me in making this an orderly and respectable town—not a den for cutthroats and robbers."

The fifty men asked for were forthcoming in a twinkling—honest, well-thinking fellows who longed to see the town ruled by a better spirit than Colonel Bill Travers. Immediately the women and children, and another parcel of miners crossed over, and but a few roughs were left on the side of Travers.

"There, you see that your power is only in your insolence, don't you?" the general said, mockingly.

"Where money goes, it most always wins the day. Boys, draw your weapons and fire upon the ruffians, if they offer molestation, while I assist the young lady to the ground."

He then strode forward to the stand where Susie and Travers were, and assisted her to the ground.

"Cuss ye, I'll have your heart out for this!" Col. Bill roared. "You'll have a chance to pay me a debt of gratitude soon—ye'll hev ter fight or flunk."

"Though I am not a fighting character, I dare to presume I could master you," the general returned, with a stiff bow. "Come, my dear child, and I will conduct you to the hotel."

"Oh! no! no! I do not want to go there," Sue cried. "I will go back to my own cabin."

"Very well," the old man said, kindly. "I will have a watch kept to see that you are not further molested by those ruffians."

They crossed the bridge and paused before the battered door of the bank.

General Arlington started as he saw the sign above the door, but Sue did not notice the fact.

"So, this is your home, eh?" he said. "Well! they have been giving the place a pretty rough usage, I declare. When John Falconer used to keep here, that door was mighty strong."

"Did you ever know him?" Sue demanded, turning her great lustrous eyes upon him.

"Ay, quite well. It's been many years, however, since I looked upon his face."

"How long?—where was he when you saw him last? Pray excuse my eagerness, but he was my father."

"Indeed! Well, I last saw Falconer at Omaha, a matter of fourteen years ago. He was bound for the East, to settle up the matter of a heritage which had come to him."

"Were there two ladies with him?"

"No. He was alone. He was very much troubled by a report that had reached him, from here, to the effect that he had carried off the bank proceeds. I am ready to swear in his behalf that he was guiltless of any such misdoing."

"Thank God for that!" Susie said, fervently.

"Though every one in Deviltry, except me, believed him guilty, I never could, but laid the deed to my step-mother, and the wife of Stern Face, who disappeared the same day."

"Undoubtedly they were the culprits," the general declared. "Then you think it would not be advisable for John Falconer ever to come back here?"

"No. I hope he may never come—not but what I should dearly love to see him, but because his life would not be safe were his identity known. The miners are very bitter against him, and have never really trusted me. Then there is an old Indian called Stern Face, who has sworn to kill him if he ever returned to this country. Thus you see his life would be in double peril."

"So it appears. Well, he will probably never return, as the heritage in the East netted him a matter of about a million dollars, which sum he has more than doubled in successful speculations. Good-day to you, child. If you need assistance send for me. When you get your bank in running order again, I wish to make a deposit in it."

Then tipping his hat, the old gent turned away, and sauntered back toward the hotel.

"What a nice old man," Sue commented, watching him from the doorway. "He is just nice, and I owe him an everlasting debt of gratitude for saving me from so horrible a fate. Oh! I wonder if the money is all right yet?"

She hurriedly turned and entered the cabin and approached the safe which stood in a niche behind the counter.

A brief examination proved to her that, although it had been tampered with, it had not been opened.

This was one relief, at least, and her spirits rose, accordingly. Securing the services of a carpenter, she soon had the demolished door of the cabin replaced with a more substantial new one, and things put in order, generally.

General Arlington returned about noon, with a package in hand, which he placed upon the counter.

"There is a hundred thousand dollars in that package, in thousand-dollar notes," he said. "I will leave it in your care for a few days. I may give out checks on some of it, so I will order you to pay such orders as bear my signature."

Seizing a pen and piece of paper, he wrote out his name in a full, graceful hand, enhanced by well arranged flourishes.

"There. Every check bearing an exact semblance of that signature is mine," he added. "I do not believe there is a penman in America who can counterfeit it, without a deal of practice."

He then took his departure and returned to Bijah Green's tavern. Some of the men who had taken sides with him, were there, and also a crowd of Col. Bill's confederates. Bill himself being the center of the group, and the cause of considerable noise and blasphemy.

"Yas, I'm goin' to make mince-meat out of that ar' old white-whiskered galoot, an' don't you forget it," he cried, flourishing a long-necked bottle over his head, and occasionally taking a drink of its contents. "I've got about six inches of old red-eye down my throat, an' by ther time I git six more, I kin lick any man from Joner down to Methusler's time."

"You better leave the Easterner alone, colonel," Wolverine Mike said. "You know ye got orfully fooled on the Nevada chap, an' this white-whiskers may be one of the same style."

"Bah! I'll risk it," the ruffian replied, glaring at the general, who was now eating his supper at the lunch counter. "I ain't afraid o' any Eastern snoozer, no matter ef he does sling on more style than a country peacock. I'm not a-goin' ter let et be said thit enny pilgrim ever cum hyar to Deviltry an' clipped off the spurs of Colonel Bill Travers. Ner I ain't a-goin' ter play mop for any floor ag'in. I'm goin' ter make the Easterner fight or flunk."

"I'll bet a cent he don't flunk at all," a miner protested. "He don't look like that style of a hairpila."

"Oho! ye think he's game, 'cause he's got money and style, do ye?" the ruffian snarled.

"No, I don't; but I'll allow still waters ginerally run deep," the miner retorted.

"Yes, an' so does whisky," the colonel snorted, taking another long swig from the bottle.

"Whisky is what sets a pilgrim on his taps, every day in a week. Now then, ye chicken-hearted duffers, I'm a-goin' ter sail in an' show ye I'm high-cocklorum uv this pious burg, yet, I am. I'm jest goin' ter challenge that high-toned cuss ter fight a duel, ef he dare."

"Well, I dare, you bet!" the general said, advancing from the counter with a huge piece of

custard pie in his hands. "I accordingly challenge you, first, to meet me in a duel to the death, and I make this a seal to the challenge."

As hespoke he stepped quickly up to the bully, and slapped the piece of soft pie full in his face.

A howl of laughter escaped the crowd, while Travers spat, sputtered, swore and dug the stuff from his eyes, in a terrible rage.

"Come!" the general cried, promptly. "There's no time for a waste of words. If you want my life, name your tools and the conditions, and we'll get to work. I never like to put a duel off, but like to see one or the other get killed!"

CHAPTER X. A STRANGE DUEL.

"THEN, cuss ye, you shall git all you want," Travers cried. "I'll choose rifles as the weapons, an' show ye ther position outside."

He accordingly led the way into the street, and was followed by the crowd, including the old general who seemed possessed of all the vigor of a man twenty years younger.

"There! you see the twin cliffs," Travers said. "They are the relative positions."

The cliffs or crags in question were down where the gulch was narrower, one being on either side, and rising with a perpendicular face to the height of a hundred feet or more, while the space separating them was not over forty yards.

Once upon a time in the history of Deviltry, two miners had stood upon the top of these cliffs, and fought a duel with rifles, and since then they had been regarded with superstition by a majority of the citizens. Hence there was an exclamation of surprise at the words of Col. Bill.

"Oh, I mean it," he said, with a vicious look.

"I purpose this: We each take a position on a cliff, with our backs to each other, level our rifles across the right shoulder, sight by aid of a piece of looking-glass, and then blaze away until one or the other dies in his boots. Ha! ha! ha! How d'ye like the flavor of that, you old crow-bait?"

"If you address that query to me, I respond, bully!" the general answered. "It is an excellent plan. Only neither are to fire until one man here below gives the signal by firing a pistol. An equal number of men on either side is to see fair play. If either of us try to use foul play, we are to be shot down like dogs."

A cheer followed this speech.

It was evident that the general was gaining friends in the town, by his bluff and independent ways.

"Yer cussed purtieler?" Col. Bill declared.

"But ef you're satisfied, I am. Git yer shootin'-iron and piece o' lookin'-glass, an' git up on one cliff or the other, where I can blaze away at ye."

"Yes, hurry up with yer shoot, fer you're keepin' the boys away from their toddy!" Mrs. Bijah Green cried, with an eye to business.

"Ef you want any one to give the signal, I'm the one fer the biz, every day in a week!"

General Arlington soon succeeded in borrowing a handsome Winchester rifle from one of the miners, and also a piece of mirror, after which he clambered up the mountain-side to the right-hand cliff, Travers having set out for the left one.

In five minutes both men had assumed their relative positions upon the cliff, with backs toward each other, rifles over right shoulders, and gaze fixed upon the mirror by whose reflection they were to obtain their aim; then they awaited the signal to fire.

Below in the gulch the men, women and children of the mining camp waited in suspense.

"God save the old gentleman," Susie Falconer murmured, as she nervously watched from the door of the bank.

"The old cuss is doomed!" was the general tone of the comments among the crowd. "Colonel Bill understands his biz, you bet, an' the old 'un is goin' to git scooped!"

To the two antagonists awaiting the signal, this was of course all side-talk, to which they were not listeners.

The colonel was nervous and inclined to blasphemy, as he grew angry with impatience.

The general, by far the cooler of the two, did not appear the least alarmed as to his personal safety.

"Cum, old woman, ef ye're a-goin' to shoot, go ahead," some of the miners exclaimed, impatiently. "We want to see the fun."

Bang! went the old horse-pistol in the hands of Mrs. Bijah, the next minute, causing a report loud enough for a small-sized cannon.

Bang! Bang!

This time it was from the twin cliffs that two reports echoed, and little wreaths of smoke curled up toward the sulit sky.

Neither man stirred, and the inference was that neither was hurt.

"Once an' nary a thing done!" Mrs. Bijah announced. "Here she goes ag'in!"

The pistol went off a second time, and bang! bang! again from the cliff.

This time there was a manifest result.

Colonel Bill uttered a frightful yell, threw up his arms and fell over the edge of the cliff.

A shudder passed through the crowd of spectators. He would be killed, they thought.

But, luckily for him, the gulch stream ran at the base of the cliff, and he struck in the water. Ready hands soon pulled him out, and found that he yet lived. He had only received a flesh-wound.

The wound to his bullying pride was evidently the greatest, for soon afterward he mounted his mustang and rode away down the gulch.

The following morning saw crowds of people gathered around two posters which had, during the night, been tacked up against one side of Bijah Green's tavern.

Sam Peterson, a Chinese laundryman, had first discovered them, and called the attention of the crowd to them, after which they were read and re-read by every one in the mining-camp.

One of them was printed in crimson letters with a marking brush, and bore the insignia of the Grim Goblin—a skull and cross-bones. The following message was conveyed by means of the poster:

"NOTICE.—It having come to my hearing that you, the people of Deviltry, have accused a man calling himself Nobby Nick of being Grim Goblin, the Avenger, I wish to emphatically deny the charge. I will allow no mortal to bear my noble name and notoriety. If you want further evidence of my work, go to the cabin of Evil Eph. But, never again accuse Nobby Nick of being Grim Goblin. Until I get in another vote on you I am

"Humbly Yours,
"GRIM GOBLIN."

And this explanation should have convinced the most stubborn that they had wronged Nobby Nick, but it was evidence which those stubborn ones would not admit.

The other poster was printed with a brush, but in black ink, and read as follows:

"NOTICE.—It having come to my notice that I was suspected of having stolen and absconded with the money in my bank, fourteen years ago, I hereby deny the charge, and lay the crime upon my wife, who left shortly after my departure. Having prospered in the East, and not wishing any one to suffer through the misdoings of my family, I shall to-night ride down the gulch into the town, and bring a package of money. If I am not molested, I will give this money over to my daughter, who has a record of what money was missing years ago, and who it belonged to. She will pay off such rightful claimants as are living, or as have heirs living, with principal and interest. If I am molested I will turn and ride away, and you will see no more of me. Remember, I am but a spirit, having died four years ago. You may try to capture me, but your grasp will rest upon—nothing."

JOHN FALCONER.

We will return to the old Indian mine. While Nobby Nick became seated, Wild Flower bustled around and assisted Stern Face in preparing the evening meal, her every movement watched by the admiring eyes of the young Nevadan.

She brought a little rude table and placed it before Nick, and then served him with some rare bits of antelope steak, with accompanying dishes of corn-bread and coffee, which tasted very relishable to him.

"Why don't you sit by and eat in company with me?" Nick asked, seeing that Wild Flower remained standing near his elbow, and Stern Face squatted on a log on the opposite side of the fire, and puffed away at his pipe.

"Wild Flower rather wait upon the pale-face brave," the girl replied, with shining eyes. "She likes to serve him very much."

"Well, I can at least remark that I have no serious objections to that," Nick replied, with a smile.

He finished his supper, finally, and signified his willingness to turn in, for he was in truth fatigued.

"White brave sleep in three wigwam," Stern Face grunted, designating the third one from the camp-fire. "Skins there, and tobacco."

Nick accordingly sought the wigwam, and found it carpeted with bear-skins, and furnished with a bear-skin couch, and a rude stand containing a lantern and box of tobacco. Not caring to smoke, Nick threw himself upon the

couch, and was soon asleep, feeling a sense of security in this subterranean abode that he would scarcely have acknowledged in the town just above it, in the outer world.

After his retirement, it was not long ere Wild Flower arose from the camp-fire to seek her own wigwam.

"The face of Wild Flower is bright," Stern Face said, in the Sioux tongue. "Her thoughts must be of a pleasant nature."

"Wild Flower is happier than ever before in her life," the maiden admitted, gazing downward, with a flush upon her cheek.

"Because she loves the pale-face brave," Stern Face suggested. "The eyes of the old chief are sharp, and they can read. It is well. Let the Wild Flower seek her couch and dream. Her choice is wise—unless—"

He added the "unless" just after she had vanished within the wigwam, and there came to his cold gray eye a glitter that was terrible in its uninterpreted meaning.

For hours he sat before the blazing camp-fire, with a gloomy expression of countenance, and smoked pipeful after pipeful of tobacco, until a great mantle of smoke hovered cloud-like above him.

Then like a noiseless shadow he rose to his feet, and craned his neck forward as though he were listening.

Several minutes he stood thus, never a muscle moving.

Then he circled cautiously around the camp-fire, and crept in a half-crouching position toward the wigwams. Instead of pausing at his own, he glided by it, and also past the one occupied by Wild Flower.

In front of the third wigwam he paused! Like a grim statue he stood erect, his every sense on the alert.

From within the wigwam came heavy breathing, which bespoke the fact that Nobby Nick slept. This sound did not seem to satisfy the old chief, entirely, for, stepping to the opening, he softly parted the skins and peered within.

Nick was lying outstretched upon the couch, with eyes closed. There could be no doubt that he was slumbering.

For several minutes the old chief stood as if in hesitation—then parting the curtains still further, he stepped within the wigwam. With cat-like tread he then approached the sleeper, his eyes fixed searchingly upon the young Nevadian's features.

When he had reached the bed or couch side, he knelt upon his knees, and studied the face of the sleeper intently.

"The face is that of John Falconer, fifteen summers ago," he mused, with darkening brow. "The mouth, the forehead, the expression are nearly the same. Ugh! the hand is bandaged. It may only be to conceal the brand that tells who Nick is."

The gleam deepened in the eyes of the old chief, which indicated that his passion was rising.

"Stern Face no fool," he continued, to himself. "He see straight like hawk. He must look at the bandaged hand."

He arose softly and glided from the wigwam, but returned in a few moments with a tiny vial of liquid, which he uncorked and held under Nobby Nick's nose several seconds, allowing him to inhale the strong fumes rising therefrom.

"He sleep sound, now," the chief muttered. "Devil no wake him for an hour. Stern Face see that hand, now."

A cautious red-skin was the Sioux miner—that was plain in all his actions. Before leaping he always looked.

Arising from the Nevadian's side he left the wigwam, and carefully approached that of Wild Flower. Parting the skins he peered within and saw her lying upon her couch of skins, apparently asleep.

With a grunt of approval he returned to the other wigwam, and drawing a keen-edged hunting-knife from his belt, began to cut away the bandages that covered Nobby Nick's scarred hand, using great caution not to prick the flesh.

It was but the work of a few seconds ere the hand was bare.

A growl of rage escaped the chief. His suspicions had not been without verification, for there was the peculiar brand upon the palm of the Nevadian's hand.

"Nobby Nick is Falconer's son!" the old chief said, rising to his feet, and folding his arms across his breast. "He come here with gloved hand to steal Stern Face's gold, like his father. He snake in the grass. Stern Face will remember his oath. He kill him!"

He stepped nearer to the couch, and raised the knife ready to strike the deadly blow, which

would score his first link of vengeance against John Falconer.

But the blow remained unstruck. There was a quick, wild cry, and Stern Face found his arm in a vise-like grasp.

"Stop! what would Stern Face do!" the voice of Wild Flower exclaimed, sharply. "What would Stern Face kill the pale-face brave for?"

"Wagh! he snake in the grass!" Stern Face replied. "See scar-brand on his hand. He John Falconer's son. He come here to steal gold of Sioux same like his treacherous father. Stern Face kill him."

"Not! Pale-face brave is Wild Flower's lover."

"Stern Face care not. He snake. He come with covered hand, fearing the vengeance of Stern Face. Stern Face no fool—he smell rat. He know him. He prove him—now he kill him."

"No! no! I say!" Wild Flower cried, stamping her foot impetuously. "Stern Face is wild. He is not wise. Nick did not come here for mischief. He knew not the secret of the scarred hand, or anything of his own or his parents' history until told by Wild Flower. He came to this country to break up the forgers. He did not bind his hand—Wild Flower bound it, fearing to have Stern Face see it lest he get angry."

"Wild Flower lie!" the chief cried, angrily. "She snake, like Nick!"

He wrested his arm from her grasp, and struck her across the face.

With a faint cry she fell back, insensible, upon the bear-skins.

Then, again grasping his gleaming knife, the revengeful chief turned toward the helpless Nevadian.

CHAPTER XI.

A ROUGH RECEPTION.

THE date of John Falconer's coming drew nigh at hand. People swarmed in the streets of Deviltry, in expectancy—men, women and children. The poster had literally set the town wild, and yet, it would have taken a sharp guesser to tell what the reception of the long-absent miner would be. Little or nothing was said to indicate whether they were in favor of reclaiming John Falconer as a free and loyal citizen or driving him forth again an outcast.

Sandy Sue was behind the counter in her little bank, engaged in figuring up some deposits for the day, and entering them upon the ledger, when a burly, mud-spattered pilgrim, in slouch hat, red shirt, overalls and stogy boots, came striding into the bank—a seedy-looking individual, with heavy reddish beard and hair, and eyes that were deep and black.

"Hello!" he saluted, taking a huge chew of tobacco from a pouch and thrusting it into his mouth, even as he spoke. "Is ther boss of this ranch in?"

"Yes, I'm the boss," Sue responded, not too pleasantly, for she "sized" the chap up as a professional rough.

"Oh, ye aire, aire yef! Waal, neow, I'll be cussed ef ye ain't rather a good-lookin' boss, too. But, I say, neow, hev ye seen a feller round this town, a-callin' hisself Genril Arlington—a gallus sort o' galoot with stove-pipe hat and white whiskers?"

"General Arlington was in town this morning," Sue replied. "You will find him at Bije Green's tavern, undoubtedly."

"Oh! I ain't purtlicker 'bout seein' him," the man replied. "It's his cash I'm arter, you bet! My handle is Jim Tucker, by gum, an' I'm jist down from Painter Flats. The Genril he giv me a leetle paper hyar, and sed as how when I presented it heer, I'd git my cash fer ther Poker mine wot he bought of me." And Tucker proceeded to fish out a soiled slip of paper from his pockets, and slapped it down upon the counter with business-like emphasis.

Sue took the order and examined it closely—then went to a desk and compared it with the chirography of General Arlington.

When she again approached the counter it was with a shake of her pretty head.

"You will have to furnish reliable identification before I can pay that order," she said. "So many forgeries have been presented lately, that I require all persons not personally known to me, to be identified."

"The devil you say!" the miner grunted. "So ye don't know me, eh, an' won't pay that order for five thousand dollars, till I'm identified afore yef! Well, I'm blasted. 'Spec' how you'll bein' callin' the order bogus, directly."

"I have my doubts as to its validity," Sue replied. "Sit down a moment—my tea-kettle is boiling over," she added, darting into the kitchen.

She did not lie in this respect, for the kettle was doing that very thing. But, another mission also was a cause of part of her hurry.

Quickly leaning out of the kitchen window, she beckoned to a small boy who was playing near, and when he came up she said:

"Go to the tavern, find General Arlington, and tell him to come quickly, and I will give you a dollar."

The boy nodded and sprang away; then she returned to the banking-room, and stood behind the counter.

"Seems to me you're a mighty long time a fixin' yer tea-kettle," Tucker growled.

"That's none of your business," Sue retorted. "Let's see that note again."

He produced it, with a growl, and she occupied several minutes in scrutinizing it.

"Come, dang you, ef yer going ter pay it, fork over the cash. Ef ye ain't, say so."

"Well, I'll admit that I am not," Sue declared, as the form of General Arlington loomed up in the doorway.

"General, please close and bar the door. Jim Tucker, you are my prisoner."

And, even as she spoke, a cocked revolver gleamed in the brave girl's hand, leveled full upon the miner.

Tucker leaped back with a horrible oath, and his hands flew toward his belt, but he drew no weapons, the deadly tube in the hands of Sandy Sue warned him what the consequences would be.

"What the devil does this mean?" he demanded, savagely.

"It means that you are my prisoner until General Arlington says he gave you this order for five thousand dollars," Sue replied, coolly.

"It is a base forgery," the general said, emphatically. "I have given no person any order, whatever. Let's see the order."

He received it and examined it with a strange smile.

"It is a clever imitation of my chirography," he said; "nevertheless, it is a counterfeit. But one person within my knowledge could imitate that hand. This fellow is undoubtedly connected with the same gang of forgers which exists in this vicinity, and I'll venture to bind him, if you keep him covered. Miss Falconer. If he offers resistance, shoot him!"

And the general proceeded to bind the miner's hand with a strap he found hanging upon the wall.

Tucker did not resist, physically—he dared not, for Sandy Sue's hand held the weapon leveled with unflinching firmness, and he knew by the snap of her eyes that she would as soon shoot as not, if provoked.

Accordingly he suffered the general to bind him, contenting himself with resorting to the utterance of all the curses he could think of.

"There you are," Arlington announced, as he secured his arms behind his back.

"We'll see if you can be made to disclose some knowledge about this nest of forgers; now Miss Falconer, if you will hold your aim upon this man, I'll soon bring a man to take charge of him. The U. S. Marshal of this section has camped up the south gulch, I understand, with a posse of men, and will be only too glad to take possession of this gentleman."

Sue nodded, and the general departed.

"You're a cussed sharp 'un, my gal," Tucker snarled, fiercely, "but, you mark me, you'll git your throat cut for this job. If I don't have the pleasure o' doin' the job, thar's them as will."

"I'm not at all alarmed," Sue replied. "Your capture is but the signal for the whole gang's defeat."

"Bah! you will find out better."

"We shall see. If I am not mistaken I know who you are, under that evident disguise of red whiskers."

"Who?" the ruffian demanded, savagely. "You'll find ye ain't so smart as ye think ye are."

"You are Blue Bill Groton—that's patent," Sue declared, and as she spoke, she reached quickly over the counter, and caught his long tangled beard. The next moment she had jerked it off.

"There! you see!" she said. "I was right."

"Devils take you!" the disguised decoy cried. "If I had the drop on you, I'd make you wilt."

"But you haven't, you see," Sue retorted, laughing at his chagrin. "I've got you in a tight place, for sure."

The general soon returned, accompanied by the U. S. Marshal, who at once swore in the general and Sue, and then took Tucker away to his camp.

A portion of the crowd followed the unfortunate "shover" of the Bearved Brothers, to the marshal's head quarters, but, they were the recipients of no particular satisfaction, for Blue Bill was put in a marquee, and a strong guard posted around his prison.

The marshal was reticent as to what disposal he proposed to make of his prisoner.

Before Bijé Green's tavern the crowd grew steadily more dense and black.

The sun went down, so that even the top-most peaks reflected none of its radiating beams, and in the valley below the dusk of evening crept on apace.

Facing the northern opening of the gulch the crowd stood with silent bearing; weapons began to appear in more than one hand, and they had their own significance. No friendly aspect, at least for the man they were all waiting for, and that man was John Falconer.

He had said he would come at dusk, and the hour was at hand for his arrival.

Col. Bill Travers was at the front of the crowd, pacing to and fro with the impatience of an animal at bay. Not a word he uttered, but the baleful glitter in his eyes spoke the same meaning as the grim silence among the crowd.

Ha! a faint murmur passes among the waiters—a general stir is visible.

A man has just hove in sight up the gloomy gulch, on horseback—a man clad in citizen's garb, except a steel cap with visor, which surmounts his head.

He comes riding nearer at a canter, seeming to have no fear, and carries in front of him upon the saddle pommel a package several inches in dimension.

Nearer—nearer he approaches, until opposite the Falconer cabin, across the stream—then draws rein.

Susie is standing in the doorway, and starts to rush forth in greeting, but he waves her back, peremptorily. He sees a movement among the crowd that arouses his suspicion of foul play; it is the aiming of two-score or more of rifles and revolvers at his person.

A laugh of defiance escapes him, and he throws his arms and hands behind him.

"Surrender!" Colonel Bill yells, at the top of his voice, at the same time advancing toward the bridge, followed by the citizens, with weapons leveled. "You are my prisoner."

"You are mistaken!" a clear, deep voice replied. "I came here expecting no molestation. Am I to understand you propose to take and treat me as a prisoner?"

"You can bet we're a-going to take ya, and make ye hump fer what ye did fourteen years ago," Travers shouted. "Ef ye budge a hair's breadth we'll riddle ye fer certain."

"Then riddle away!" Falconer cried. "I've offered to do more than a fair thing by you, and now that you spurn that offer, you must lose your game. Tai tai!"

He wheeled his horse like a flash, and dashed away up the gulch.

"Fire!" howled the colonel; "shoot the thief through the back!"

And a deafening explosion of powder answered the command.

"Ha! ha! your bullets are but little hall-stones!" Falconer shouted back. "You had best save your ammunition, while I will save the gold you have scorned to receive. Ha! ha!"

"Stop! stop!" Travers shouted, infuriated at the apparent defeat, for no part of the bullets fired at the ex-miner had seemed to take effect. "Shoot him, I tell you, somebody!"

Another volley was accordingly fired, but without effect, for Falconer dashed on, waving his hand back, occasionally, in defiance.

Once more the enraged citizens fired, and this time scored a hit. The horse that Falconer rode uttered an almost human scream, and fell forward to the ground heavily.

Falconer had landed upon his feet first, however, and darted on at a greater speed than when on horseback, soon disappearing from view up the gulch.

A figure stood upon one of the Twin Cliffs viewing the scene below. The person was garbed as a man, but the face and form were unmistakably feminine. And upon the face there was a strange, exultant expression, as she saw Falconer escape.

"Good! He is now left for me," she said, turning away. "What Travers has lost, I have won!"

The defeated citizens of Deviltry, generally, adjourned to Bijé Green's tavern for refresh-

ments after watching their contemplated victim escape. All except Col. Bill.

He lounged around until he thought he was not observed and then crossed the bridge and hurried up the gulch to where Falconer's horse had fallen.

The neighborhood was deserted.

The poor animal was quite dead, having been riddled by a dozen bullets.

Travers uttered an exclamation of delight as he noted that the package was still strapped to the pommel of the saddle.

"Mine!" he said, as he cut it loose and hefted it. "This is what Falconer offered to give to the ones he robbed. But for my influence, the cursed fools would have been foolish enough to have accepted it. Ha! ha! it's mine now."

He did not pause to open it, but hurried on up the gulch. Once or twice he halted, nervously, fancying he heard footsteps, but could see no signs of human presence through the gloom that surrounded him.

In the course of half an hour he came to a halt in the depths of a heavy pine forest that enveloped the gulch bottom, and listened again. Not a sound could he hear denoting human presence in that vicinity.

"It will be as good a place as any to examine my prize," he muttered.

"Ha! ha! you've struck a bonanza, Bill Travers, and you'll be a fool if you ever whack up with your brethren."

He scraped together some leaves and dry twigs, and soon had a bright fire blazing beneath the forest cover.

Then seating himself upon a fallen log, he proceeded to untie the package.

"Thar must be a fat stake in here," he chuckled, "and if thar is, East I go ter set up as a first-class nabob."

"Your ill-gotten gains will avail you not, Bill Travers, for you are another of Grim Goblin's marked men!" a sharp deep voice cried, and the following instant there was the vivid flash and ringing report of a rifle.

Travers gasped, and attempted to gain his feet, but fell forward upon his face, and expired after a few short struggles.

The moment after Grim Goblin stepped forth into the firelight. Scarcely noticing the body of Travers, he picked up the packet and tore it open.

Instead of money, he found it stuffed full of bits of valueless paper.

Falconer had been too sharp for the sharpers; instead of putting his money in the package, he had put it in his pocket, and used the package as a blind.

Grim Goblin seemed to comprehend this fact, for, dropping the package with a curse, he hurried away into the woodland.

About three hours later General Arlington sat in an easy-chair in his room at the tavern, with his head resting upon his hand, buried in deep meditation, when there came a light rap upon the door.

"Come in," he said, rousing up, and supposing it was the landlady who knocked, for he had ordered a cup of coffee to be fetched to his room.

The door opened, and instead of the landlady, there entered no less a person than the same female who had visited Nobby Nick—Moll McGregor!

At sight of her, General Arlington staggered to his feet, in astonishment.

"You!" he managed to gasp, though it cost him an effort. "You?"

"Exactly. I!" the woman replied, coming forward. "Are you surprised that I should still be on the hunt for you?"

"On the hunt for me?"

"On the hunt for you, precisely! You basely deserted me, and is it anything surprising that I should wish to find you, and clasp you once more to my bosom?"

"Fool!" the general cried, rising—"Idiot! Whom do you take me for?"

Moll McGregor laughed.

"Well, when I saw you skinning out of the gulch to-night, about the best you knew how, I very naturally concluded that you were none less than John Falconer. Ha! ha!"

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

"You lie!" the general cried. "I am General Arlington."

"No, I do not lie," the woman replied. "I know you—knew you were coming ere you came. I am your wife that was, fourteen years ago. You ran away and deserted me. I also skipped out with what money I could lay my hands on. Stern Face's squaw suspected me,

and I lured her into the mountains and shot her. Since then, I have been drifting about, hunting for you. I long for a different sort of life than I have been leading, and want you to take me back. I have money, by the million, and will share it equally with you."

"Bah! I'd die of starvation before I'd take a cent of it, and cheerfully accept a life of imprisonment in some foul dungeon, rather than for a moment take you back. Go, woman—go! You were always the curse of my life, and have been the means of bringing disgrace upon my head."

"Oh! you needn't apprise me of my shortcomings; I am well aware that I'm no saint," was the sarcastic reply. "Nevertheless I am tired of a harum-scarum life, and want to settle down. You must receive me back with open arms, or it will be the worse for you!"

"What! you dare to threaten me! You are insane, woman!"

"Not a bit of it," the runaway wife replied. "I know what I'm about, every day in the week. Below in the bar-room, you doubtless hear a noisy crowd, who are drinking and carousing, to drown their grief and disappointment at losing you. Were I to inform them that John Falconer could be found in this room, your life would not be worth the bits of paper you had, to-night, in the budget attached to your saddle-bow."

"Bah! we shall see!" the general cried, fiercely, and with agility not becoming his apparent age, he leaped upon her, and bore her to the floor.

Smothering her screams with a cushion, he managed to bind her hands; then he gagged her; after which he secured her feet, thus having her a safe prisoner.

Opening a closet door, he thrust her in to the dark recess, and closed the door, again.

"There! lie there till I make up my mind what to do with you," he muttered. "I'll see which plays the trump hand, this deal."

He then went back and resumed his former position, and buried himself in a deep reverie. So deep in fact that it turned into a sound slumber from which he did not awaken until aroused by a heavy jar.

He awoke to find himself slung over a man's shoulder, and being carried along out of his room into the hallway of the hotel.

He tried to shout for assistance but could not. A gag in his mouth prevented him. He tried to struggle to release himself, but also found that impossible.

He had been tightly bound, hand and foot, and could only submit to being carried along upon the shoulders of his capturer, whose face he could not see.

Out into the main hall, they went, and then along to a narrower passage, which was entered and followed until at last the general's captor came to a pause, for a moment, during which space of time there was a creaking sound, after which the man entered a room off from the hall, when there was another creaking sound, similar to the first.

In this room the general was lowered to his feet and he beheld his captor's face.

"Stern Face!" was his exclamation, beneath his gag, and the old chief seemed to comprehend his meaning, for he said, calmly:

"Yes, I am Stern Face, once the brother miner of John Falconer. You are John Falconer, beneath your long beard—same thief who ran away, fourteen years ago. Stern Face know you—never forget you! He swore to kill you and yours, for treacherous snakes. He no kill Sunny Hair. He capture you and your boy. He kill you both, if Wild Flower no bring proof of your innocence."

Then, not waiting to note the effect of his words, he threw a blanket over the head and face of John Falconer, as we shall continue to call him, hereafter, and again lifting him in his arms, descended through the trap that had served as a mode of escape for Nick and Wild Flower, not many hours before.

Moll McGregor, otherwise the faithless second wife of John Falconer, lay for hours in the closet unable to rid herself of the gag and bonds that bound her limbs.

Desperately and determinedly, however, did she writhe and struggle, until, after several hours of effort, she succeeded in getting her hands free. The remaining work of liberating herself was but short, and she soon stood out in the upper hall.

Here she disguised herself with a sandy wig, and beard, and went boldly down into the bar-room and out into the street.

Two men immediately left their position at

the bar, where they had been drinking, and followed her, out into the night.

Both were roughly-dressed, common-looking miners, but were armed to the teeth.

Sandy Sue was seated that same evening in her cabin, engaged in sewing, when there came a knock at the door.

Dropping her work she sprang hastily to open it, for she expected that it was her father's knock. She had been watching and waiting with all eagerness for him to come back, and her heart beat fast as she turned the knob and opened the door.

But, disappointment flew into her face as she beheld standing without—not John Falconer, but Wild Flower!

"Let me come in," the half-breed girl said, quickly. "I have bad news for Sandy Sue, and we must work."

"What is it—tell me, quickly," Sue cried, admitting her, and handing her a stool.

"I'll tell you if you listen," Wild Flower said. "Your father, John Falconer, and your brother, Nobby Nick, are both captives in the power of Stern Face."

Sue uttered a horrified exclamation. She well knew of Stern Face's vengeful oath, and the peril of those who were dear to her instantly flashed across her mind.

"My brother you say—is Nobby Nick my brother?" she asked.

"Yes, he is your brother. He and John Falconer are both in Stern Face's power, and it depends on us whether they live or die. Wild Flower is in love with Sandy Sue's brother; she would fight through fire for his sake. She pleads with Stern Face, and he consented not to kill them until two sunrises, and if in that time we can prove that John Falconer did not steal the money, Stern Face will release them."

"Oh! Wild Flower you are a brave, noble girl. But it will be impossible for us to produce the required proof. My mother, or rather step-mother, was undoubtedly the culprit, and she only could furnish the desired proof by confessing."

"Exactly. And she must be made to give a confession."

"But, how? Where can we find her?"

"Wild Flower will find her, in a few hours. She has long suspected who she was, and if Sandy Sue will arm herself, and follow the Indian girl's lead, the game will be cornered ere another sunrise."

"Then you can rely on me," Sue said, bravely. "I am no coward, and will help you all I can to trail this woman down and extort from her a confession of her misdeeds."

"Then prepare at once. Arm yourself with revolvers, and dress in men's clothing, as it will facilitate our speed in getting through among the rocks."

Sue hastened to obey, and ere many minutes elapsed they were both *en route*, like sleuths of the night, on the search for the faithless wife of John Falconer. They were not the only ones.

The two men who had followed the tigress from the tavern gained on her, as she hurried away up the gulch, and made their pursuit as noiseless as possible.

Two more miners might have been seen bringing up their rear in the same cautious manner, making it altogether a night chase of a very interesting nature.

The first pursuers were soon near enough to make aim certain, and halting, they leveled their revolvers at the figure ahead, and cried:

"Halt! Face about, or you are a dead man!"

And there was no mistaking the meaning of their order—it was life or death.

Moll McGregor seemed to recognize their voices, for she wheeled about abruptly, and advanced toward them.

"There! there! Put up your tools, and don't try to play highway tricks on me," she said, with a grim laugh. "It's I—Marie!"

"Oh, yes, so we are aware," one of the men replied. "And you are the very one we want."

"Oh!" the woman said, shoving her hands down into her jacket pockets, and giving vent to a whistle of surprise. "What, may I inquire, do you want of me?"

"We want you for your funny little pranks of late, mum—in fact, we've found out that you are the one who has been playing up Grim Goblin, the Avenger. Hol! hol! You start, you shew, but not so hard as you will when you're yanked up to a limb."

"Yes, I start, for I thought my secret safe in my own keeping," she replied. "But you shall not take me—oh! no!"

Even as she finished speaking she whipped a

pair of revolvers from her jacket pockets, and fired upon them, dropping both of them as though by magic.

Then she turned and fled.

Loud yells came from the rear, and the sound of rapid footfalls.

She was pursued by others of the desperate gang of Bearded Brothers, whose queen and literal leader she had been for many years; they trusted her implicitly, when, all the while, she had abused their trust, and now that they had learned of her treachery and were pursuing her, she knew too surely that her escape was a matter of skill and nerve.

Summoning all her strength she sped along up the gulch as fast as she could run, but, try her best, she could not get out of the sound of the pursuing footfalls.

To follow her through the tortuous windings and over the crooks and turns of the route she chose would necessitate a description of an almost unflagging run.

For hours she sped on, her strength fast leaving her, and her footsteps slower and more uncertain, from sheer fatigue.

At last she entered a long, narrow chasm or fissure between two mountains, into which the light of early dawn was just creeping.

"If I can get through this, I am safe among the caves beyond," she muttered, a wild, haggard expression in her eyes.

If! It is a word that interposes between full many a success of this world, and brings death and disaster to the front.

If she could get through the chasm unmolested, the way lay open for her escape! But she did not.

She had not gone fifty yards into the chasm when she heard the Bearded Brothers in her rear, near the mouth of the pass, yelling and cursing, and saw step out across her path, in front, two persons, who leveled cocked revolvers full upon her.

"Stop!" cried the voice of Wild Flower, for it was she and Sandy Sue who had lain in wait for the female figure, on not finding her at the rendezvous. "You are our prisoner. Throw up your hands, or I'll fire!"

So exhausted was the fugitive that she did not try to disobey, and the girls bound her in a jiffy.

"Quick! Take me out of this place, or they will get me," the forgeress said, with a nervous glance.

"We will rescue you only on one condition," Wild Flower said, in a stern, ringing tone.

"What is that?" Marie demanded, eagerly.

"It is this," Wild Flower replied. "When we take you before my father, Stern Face, you are to confess to him that it was you instead of John Falconer, who robbed the bank, fourteen years ago. Swear that you will do this, and then take your departure from this section of the country, and we will take you direct to Stern Face."

"And if I refuse?"

"We will bind your feet, and leave you lying here at the mercy of the Bearded Brothers."

Marie shuddered.

Too well she knew the rough men who were seeking her life, not to know that her fate would be a horrible one.

"I swear by my hope of redemption in the next world, to do as you wish," she cried. "I will do any thing rather than fall into the hands of those human wolves on my trail."

"We shall be doing according as you have done by others, did we leave you to their tender mercy!" Wild Flower declared. "Come!"

She blindfolded the captive with a scarf—then she and Sue seized her, each by an arm, and hurried on through the passage. As soon as they were able to find a secure hiding-place they came to a stop and waited for darkness to again fall.

The remainder may be briefly told in a few words.

When night once more fell, the two brave girls set out for the old Indian mine, where they arrived in safety, and, true to her promise, Marie confessed before Stern Face that it was she who had stolen the money fourteen years previous.

When questioned as to what she had done with the wife of Stern Face, she said she had gone back to the South. She was reticent on all other points; but Stern Face's doubts were satisfied, and he instructed Wild Flower to conduct her from the mine and set her at liberty.

John Falconer and his son were then released, and a joyous reunion and reconciliation took place within the mine.

Marie, released, disappeared; none could tell

where or whence. A woman in sex, yet in heart and hand a devil incarnate, she had lived a wilder life than many a hardened ruffian and ruffian. But never, in all those years of vicious indulgence in the frenzy of excitement had she permitted any intimacy that could taint her woman's honor! She was, indeed, a strange compound of evil and good, the explanation of whose career was to be measurably found in the humane supposition of a species of insanity that goaded her to do and dare the very worst that a human arm and will could do—as if in revenge for the first rash act that made her a thief and outcast. Even John Falconer, while he could only shudder at the thought that she had been and still was his wife, yet had not the heart to wish her punished for her crime, and so, with her full assent she passed into the world again to be known no more as the thing she had been, but with the millions at her command which her crime-stained hands had won—what part was it not possible for her to play in a new sphere or in another continent?

Most of the Brothers were later captured by the U. S. Marshal, assisted by Nevada Nick, and taken to the fort for trial and condemnation.

Having amassed the equivalent of a dozen fortunes, the friends abandoned the hidden mine and separated, Nick and Wild Flower going to Denver where they were married. John Falconer and Susie to Chicago, where they now live, but Stern Face true to his love for the wilderness passed into the North-west to the hunting regions of his people, the Sioux—among whom he reigns as Peacemaker, Father and Great Medicine.

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